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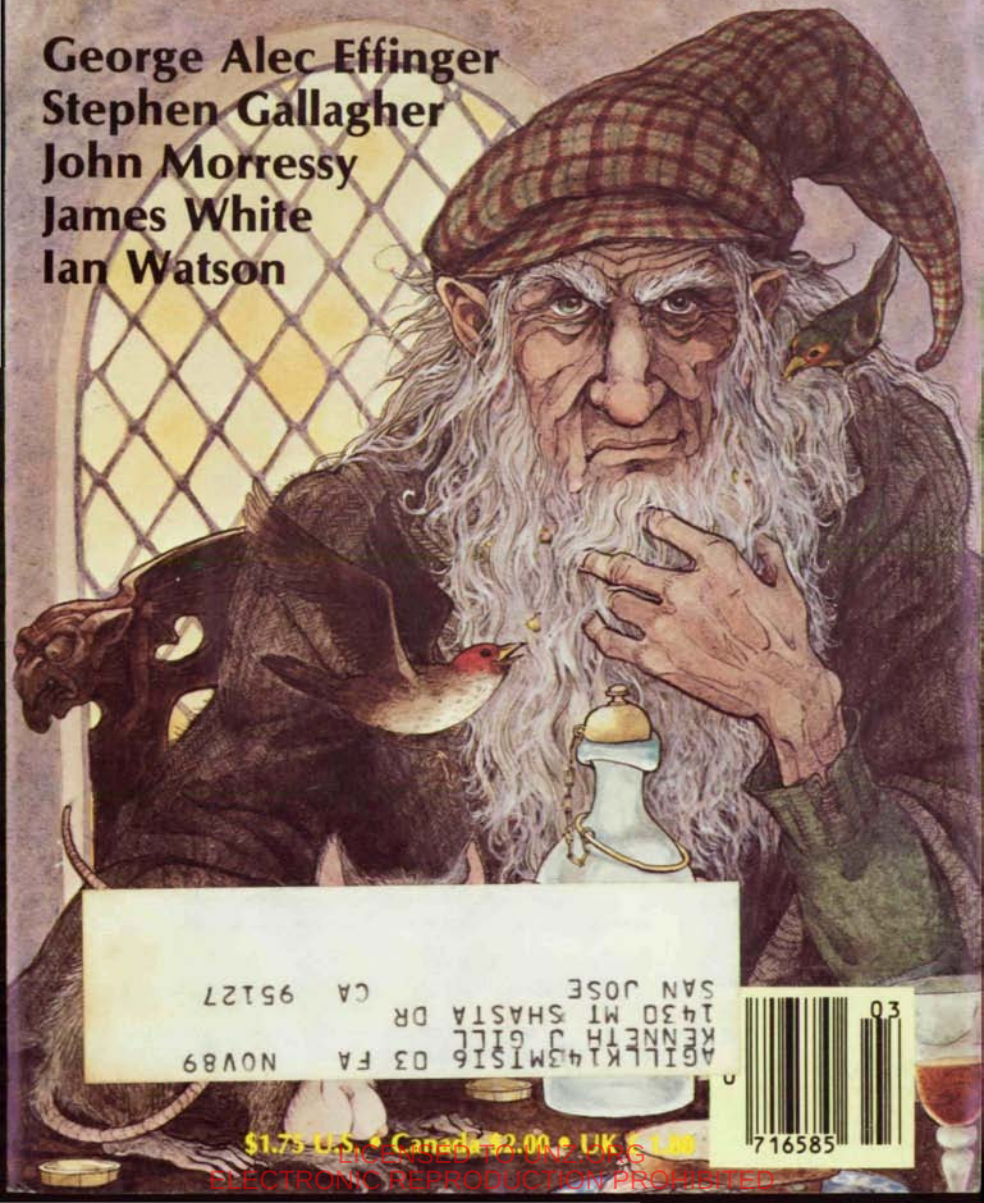

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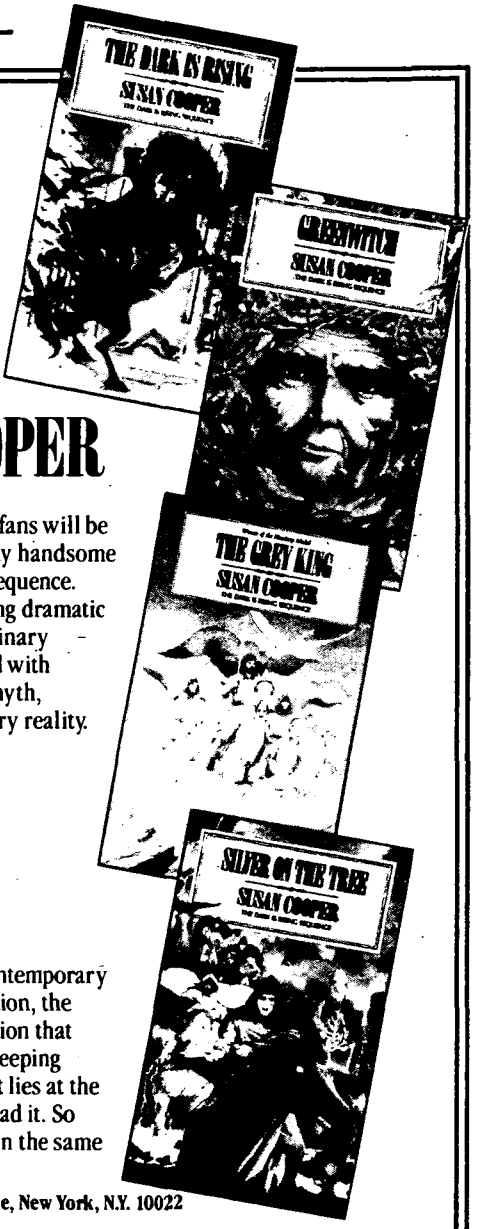

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Marc Laidlaw's stories have appeared in Omni, Asimov's *and several anthologies, and his novel, DAD'S NUKE, was published in 1986 by Donald I. Fine. His second story for F&SF concerns a restless wizard in a time when science has been almost forgotten. . .*

Faust Forward

BY

MARC LAIDLAW

Old Rotcod's cottage rose like a tombstone at the edge of the Merry Meadow, casting its gloomy image over the otherwise cheerful face of Glamorspell Pond. When the fairykids came down to frolic in the mud, they always kept to the stretch of shoreline farthest from the sagging gray house — not that they would ever say a word against it. When they saw old Rotcod himself scowling out through a dust-bleared window, they would wave and call for him to strip from his strict black garments and come join them for a naked swim in the crystalline pond. No one was offended when he ignored them, or made a face and pulled the blinds. Only the most radical fairies hinted that it was just as well he kept to himself, that his presence might dim the blue water like a bottle of black ink spilled into a sacred well. And not a fairykid took offense when, coming down to the pool on a hot day with their picnic baskets and water nymphs, they discovered that in the night the pond had been surrounded by a barrier of fairy-proof iron-thorn shrubberies. Instead, they shrugged and giggled at Rotcod's humor, then wandered away in search of another spot in which to pass the afternoon.

In the dim recesses of his cottage, Rotcod waited until the sounds of merriment had expired in the depths of the forest. It was too much to hope that they had been devoured by carnivores, or snatched by starving fairy-traps, though the thoughts made him chuckle. "Maybe now I can get some work done."

His ponderous desk was covered with immense volumes whose pages he had stained with his lunches or crumpled in his frustration. He open-

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ed one at random, a bright blue tome whose milk-white pages were covered with glittering golden calligraphy that began to incant in angelic tones as his eyes fell upon the first paragraph:

"By the power of Nazacl, the Archimage may easily acquaint himself with all the heavenly vaultings up to and including the sixteenth, which surpasses the common intelligences of invisibility, omniscience, clairvoyance, clairaudience, teleolofaction, levitation, immortal —"

"Oh, shut up!"

He slammed the book silent in mid-syllable. Rising from his hard, creaking chair, he began to shove the books to the floor. Many cried out at his handling, and one in particular — a text of practical magical philosophy, which had often warned him against studying forbidden things — began to weep like a sentimental idiot.

"Oh Rotcod!" it wailed from the floor. "Rotcod, turn back before it is too late. Correct your behavior, I beg you. Bend diligently to your astrology, take up your thaumaturge's tools, call upon the elements and —"

Rotcod stepped squarely on one flickering page of admonitions, then stooped and tore the book in half along the spine. There was a chorus of screams from the other books as he tossed the volume into the squat black furnace he had forged himself from unholy iron, having found no fairy-smith able to do the work without contracting a devilish dermatitis.

"What good is magic?" he demanded of the leaping flames. He swept his stern gaze over the rest of his library, but the surviving books lay timid and sullen now, infected with his ill humor. "I have practiced demonology for thirteen hundred years, with nothing to show for it but a horde of mindless slaves who are powerless to think for themselves. I've sucked the juice from all forms and colors of magic —black, white, purple, and plaid. I have a Phoenix that craps molten gold in my hands. Immortality, invisibility, lead into gold into lead again, and it's all worthless. These are things any man can accomplish. Any man? Hah! Any fairy! Even the lazy fairies live forever."

He began to stalk around the room, kicking through books, searching for one in particular.

"I know you're here. You've kept silent all these years because of that damned philosophy. It's gone now, do you hear? It can't bully you anymore. Speak up. You whispered to me once, I remember. You said there was something more than magic. I was half asleep with boredom from that astral sex manual, but I came wide awake and you fell silent."

There was a muted gobble, but the other books hurried to quash it, spreading their leaves over the spot. Rotcod dug into the heap of gilt buckram and dragonscale, at last emerging with a slim black volume nipped in his nails.

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"Don't say a word!" cried three sequelae to the book he had burned.

But the black book squirmed in his hand, dryly rustling, fluttering its pages like a bird about to take wing. Dust drifted over his sleeve. "At last," it whispered, opening flat on his palm.

"Yes," said Rotcod. "You are the one, aren't you?"

"No, Rotcod, no!" cried the others.

"Be silent or I'll use you all to warm the cottage."

The black volume settled down into the wrinkles of his palm, emanating a darkly prosaic light as it found its voice for the first time in years. He could no longer remember how he had acquired the book. Aeons ago, perhaps, he had picked it up from the estate of a wizard moving on to a higher plane. In his youth it would have meant little to him, for in those days all magic had lain before him, unfathomed, unfulfilled; that was before he had tired of the world and its limitlessness. He had gorged himself on the fattest books, while this one resembled nothing so much as a pamphlet bound in human skin.

"What are you?" he asked.

"I am Science," said the book.

The room seemed to recede. The anxious voices of his familiar volumes were muffled by the thunder of blood in his ears.

"Science," he repeated. "Yes, I've heard of you now and then. But my magical friends have kept you well hid, haven't they?"

"For your own good!" cried a flapping ephemeris.

"I've had enough of your judgements," he told his library. "I'll come to my own opinions from now on."

"Excellent," said the slender book. "Let me show you my world."

His eyes darkened. "Not another dimension, I hope, not another fantastic door into dreams. I've had enough of worlds within worlds, I'm warning you."

"No, no, nothing like that. It is this world, but transmuted, purged of magic. Imagine the sameness of day after day. Imagine that the living will die and stay dead."

"Stay dead? Impossible."

"Let me show you, Rotcod. Let us take a walk."

"No, Rotcod, no!" cried his old books, but he scarcely heard them now. He twisted the mummified fist of a doorknob and let himself out, flinching instinctively from the golden sunlight that always awaited him, unless the air was full of moonlight or starshine. But today, strangely, the light seemed thin and insubstantial; it hardly warmed his black-clad arms.

"Too late, too late," wailed the volumes in his house. The door just managed to slam itself shut.

A feverish breeze blew through the iron hedge. Rotcod tucked the black book under his arm, where he could listen to its dry ruminations as he walked. The grass, he noticed, no longer looked as relentlessly green as

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was common, and here and there he noted scraps and twisted bits of metal among the wildflowers.

"You sense my power already," said the book approvingly. "I can see that you will be an excellent student."

"What is this I see around me? These stray fragments of . . . I know not the word."

"Trash."

Rotcod shivered at the wrongness of the sound, so lacking in the mellifluous quality he had come to associate with everything in his world.

Normally his ears would have picked up the laughter of fairies at a great distance; they were always troubling his concentration. But today he could hardly hear them. Accordingly, they found him first, surprising him before he had reached their favorite glade. With a cascade of laughter, they sprang into being from trees and boulders, forming a ring around him. He had the impression that they were transparent, that the forest itself was a crude painting done on glass with watery pigments. Only the book seemed real.

"Hello, Rotcod!" the nearest fairy girl said. She was tiny and blonde, with flowers decked in her hair, and she seemed intent on hugging him around the knees. "You've come to play with us, haven't you?"

The book chuckled. "Go ahead."

Rotcod stooped and brushed his fingers through the child's hair, scattering petals that fell like drops of lead and singed the grass. She screamed and backed away from him, her voice hardly reaching his ears. He wasn't sure if she was delighted or in agony; with fairies, it was hard to tell. She went kicking away from him, gray in the face, stumbling over roots and rocks, and finally she sprawled backward, there to lie unmoving while her face grew blacker and blacker. Suddenly the forest looked real again, more solid than ever. The voices of the other fairies sounded sharp as they gathered around their companion.

"What are you doing, Kalessa? You're not breathing."

"I don't believe it," said Rotcod. "She is dead."

They looked at him in astonishment.

"Dead," said one.

It was a word they knew from myths; none of them seemed to remember quite what it meant. To Rotcod it had suddenly ceased being an abstraction. He noticed that around the little blonde corpse were stray bits of string, wads of dirty paper, more trash. He turned on his heel and strode off toward home, holding the book open with both hands, conversing loudly as he went.

"I thought it was a fable," he exclaimed. "But now I have seen it with my own eyes. Death — imagine! Then what of the other things I've thought incredible?"

"They can all be yours."

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"What of disease? Is there truly such a thing?"

"There can be, yes."

A bird toppled from its perch in a branch overhead. Its eyes were drops of blood. He paused to watch as worms humped from the ground and began to devour it. But they, too, broke out in blood and began to fester where they crawled.

"Incredible," he said.

"And it will spread."

He hurried on, spying his cottage. The iron hedge around the pond had begun to rust; the thorns looked poisonous to man and fairy alike. His house had also changed. The roof sat squarely atop the walls; the place no longer sagged or glowered, but simply inhabited space like any little box. He was surprised to see an identical dwelling in the middle of the Merry Meadow, and another beyond that. A great deal of building was underway; huge vehicles lumbered about, scraping the uneven earth into uniformity. They moved with none of the grace of the fairies' floating boats, and they spouted dense black smoke. Two monsters collided and the drivers sprang out, cursing so vehemently that Rotcod expected the ground to open beneath them. Instead, they drew expandable tubes, aimed them at one another, and each dropped dead to the grass. He studied their deaths for some time, wondering how quickly this new twist would lose its novelty.

In a thoughtful mood, Rotcod entered his house and found it much changed in his absence. There were no dark corners, no books to berate him or offer opinions for his consideration. He set the black pamphlet on a polished counter and moved through the rooms, shading his eyes from the glaring light that emanated from the ceilings. He felt lost, uncertain of which furniture was meant for sitting or sleeping on.

He returned at last to the black book. "What is all this?" he asked.

The book did not reply. He thought that it might be formulating an explanation, but gradually he realized that it was simply inert. Its characters did not glow or try to catch his eyes. When it remained mute, he attempted to read it. Every page was covered with instructions printed in numerical order, but meaningless despite the arrangement.

"What is a capacitor?" he asked. "Where is 'Slot A'?"

The volume defied both his eye and his intellect until he closed it and set it down carefully. He was afraid to hurl it against the wall as he had so many other books. This one, in its quiet way, commanded his respect.

Rotcod cast an eye heavenward and saw that gray vapor cloaked the sky beyond the tinted windows. Stepping outside, he found that it burned his lungs as well. The forest had been neatly cleared while he was indoors, and among the stumps the fairykids sat

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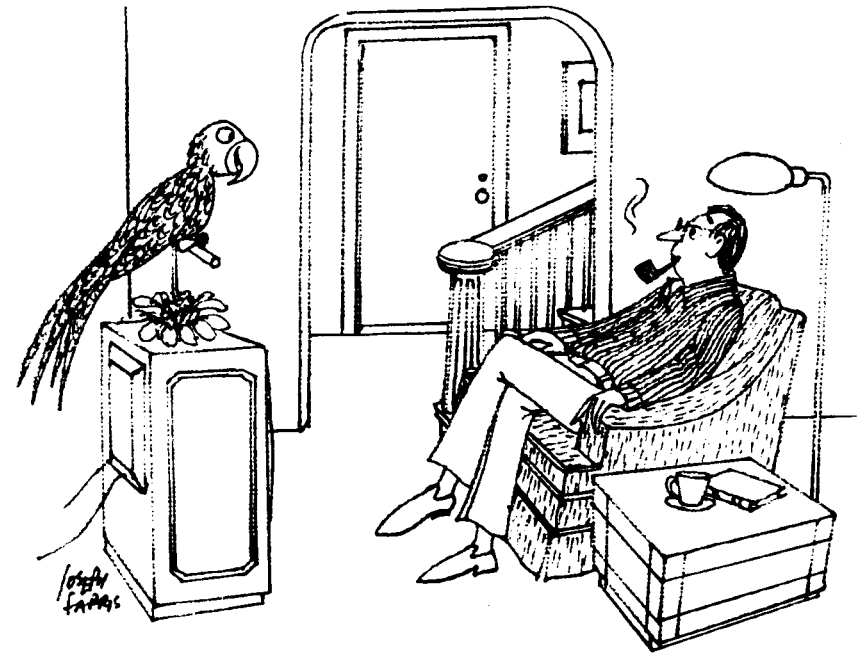
with forlorn expressions. When they saw him, they visibly brightened, recognizing their companion from the old world. They started toward him, and Rotcod could not keep himself from hurrying to meet them halfway. He had never thought he would welcome their company, but the sound of their laughter warmed him in an unfamiliar way. He hurried along the thorny barrier he had erected last night with a few choice syllables, thankful that the fairies had not changed. It was their way to face difficulties with grace and equanimity.

Unfortunately, he stumbled in a pothole and rolled to the brown grass a moment before they reached him. He was thus unprepared when, still, smiling, they drew their steel knives and fell upon him.



"How about Tom Brokaw for a change?"

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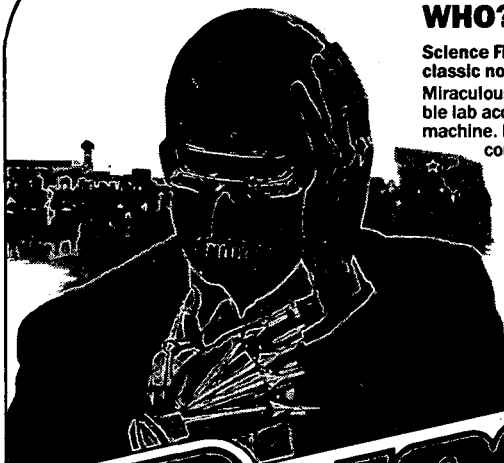

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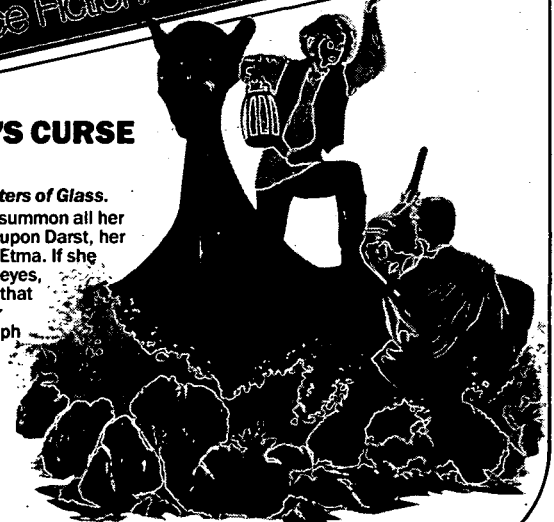

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In Advance of The Landing: Folk Concepts of Outer Space. Photography and text by Douglas Curran, with a Foreword by Tom Wolfe. Abbeville Press (1985), $13.56 (discounted)

Universe 16. Terry Carr, Ed. Doubleday, $12.95

Hitler Victorious, Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg, Eds. Garland (price?) [Vol. 624 in the Garland Reference Library of The Humanities]

NOTED:

The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and The Supernatural, Jack Sullivan, Ed. Viking/Penguin, $29.95

The Science Fiction and Fantasy Engagement Calendar 1987, Aleister Halley. Main Street (William Case House, Pittstown, NJ 08867), $7.95

It is not a month in which any prominent SF authors released new novels or even major short-story collections. Which is O.K. with me, because I have come across a clutch of variously fascinating books that fall outside those parameters. Some, in fact, sought me out.

For example, because he knows I am working on a novel which supposes a "flying saucer" crash on Earth, my friend Sidney Coleman has called my attention to a fascinating text-and-picture book released in 1985. It's an approximately 8x10 enamelled-stock paperback. There may, I suppose, have been a hardbound edition. You may still be able to find copies in new-book stores; certainly in a good

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used-book store, and probably at around thirteen dollars in paper though the publication price was somewhat higher. Take a look — you may be as irresistably drawn into it as I was, even though the Tom Wolfe intro degenerates into piffle off the point.

In Advance of The Landing resulted when Canadian photographer Douglas Curran became fascinated by people who build rocket and flying-saucer effigies. He thus inevitably also came into contact with the true believers in the various philosophical constructs around the idea that wise visitors from outer space — or Heaven, or other dimensions — have been monitoring us and will soon arrive to possibly render final judgement, possibly bring us the ultimate era of peace and love.

Curran is clearly simply a good photographer and thinking human being who could not let go of this concept despite the fact that it strained his limited financial resources. His physical and intellectual odyssey, in which a secondhand Renault 16 became his home and office for several years, began calmly but irrevocably in the middle 1970s, when he came upon a large rocket effigy cocked at an upward angle on posts in front of a general store in South Bolton, Quebec. The owner, Charlie LaBranche, had it built by two carpenters in 1964, and is quoted as saying: "I love to watch the cars come around the corner and fall off the pavement." Curran fell into a fascination.

In his photo, the rocket is rather weatherworn but still structurally sound, looking a bit like a V2 with the sharp lines rounded off. It appears quite viable, as a matter of fact . . . fit it with fuel tanks and an engine, and it might go.

This is a little less true of an effigy found along Highway One in Apache, Arizona — that one might be a playground toy — and it is certainly not true of Verdun Baxandahl's attempt in a stand of aspen outside Barrhead, Alberta. That one was built of sheet aluminum and old tin signs by Baxandahl and his sons, and wouldn't fool anyone. But it was erected after Sputnik went up because "Everyone was talking about rockets and I wanted one."

The book is full of such devices, mostly in black-and-white; the one I want for my back yard is Clayton Bailey's sculptural "Alien Rocket" in Port Costa, California. Not only does it seem excellently finished, it stands erect and is generically stefnal, since it could also quite easily be taken for a robot stolidly capable of giving pause to unprepared visitors.

Most of the effigies, though, are of saucers — saucer-shaped refreshment stands, saucer-inspired modular housing that was actually marketed, a concrete effigy found in the San Bernardino hills, and some constructions that were intended to fly. Some of the

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latter were the objects of years of hard work and ingenuity, though it is not always clear whether all of the ingenuity was free of venal motive.

In this respect, Curran's pictures, and their accompanying text and captions, constitute a unique sociological resource. It gains depth from his interviews with such persons as Ruth Norman ("Uriel") and her family of El Cajon, California, who built a major enterprise on her representations of the wise galactic civilization. Her Unarius Educational Foundation maintains exhibits depicting life on other worlds controlled by that civilization, sponsors convocations in which attendees wear costumes representing their past lives as potentates on those planets, and purchased a multi-acre site on which the 32 city-ships of their "Space Brothers" have at various times been expected to land.

Curran is particularly good as a reporter on this widespread Post-War phenomenon (on which Carl Jung wrote extensively at the time), that has produced worldwide involvement in "saucers" not as technology but as manifestations of an elaborated metaphysics also involving reincarnation and spiritualism. It's striking that somewhere in almost every one of these intellections, Jesus Christ figures as a visitor from wise outer space, often as an avatar of a personality also shared by the philosopher in question, or by a spouse or close relative of that philosopher. There is a marvelously evocative color photo of Mrs. Norman and one of her sons in costume, posed in their suburban driveway beside their decorated electric blue '73 Cadillac with the flying saucer model on its roof.

Curran's text also covers the history of saucerism, and speaks with great evenhandedness when discussing various key figures, over the entire range of attitudes from J. Allen Hynek to Mrs. Norman. He fills us in on such things as Project Bluebook, the roles of George Adamski and Madeleine Rodeffer, and on the construction of a "landing pad" in St. Paul, Alberta. The latter is an expression of civic effort; the "pad" — a well-constructed, attractive platform — has been designated "international" by the community "as a symbol of our faith that mankind will maintain the outer universe free from national wars and strife." A town-wide fund-raising effort, associated with the attitude toward the pad, raised sums matched by the provincial and federal branches of the Canadian government. As a result, $975,000 were presented to Mother Teresa, who travelled to Alberta to accept the donation toward her work with the poor in India. A color photograph of the tastefully staged and heavily attended event appears in the book.

"If there is sickness in outer space we would go there too," Mother Teresa said. It is the reportage of events like this, counterpoised with cover-

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age of events like the New Age Convention at Mt. Rainier, that elevates Curran's book from being some sort of exploitation or novelty. It's a genuine as well as a fascinating document.

Universe 16 is of course part of a long and honorable series of anthologies of original SF, edited with acumen and dedication by Terry Carr. Its text in this example is at least as good as ever.

The lead novelette, "Hotel Mind Slaves," starts you out beautifully. It's by Ronald Anthony Cross; his milieu this time is a sprawling, fully automated ultra-ritzy resort hotel inhabited by post-Armageddon barbarians. I won't summarize it for you; Terry calls Cross the most original voice in SF since R. A. Lafferty, and I wouldn't want you to hold any preconceived notions as you plummet through what he's done here.

(I would have said Tiptree, not Lafferty, but, then, I haven't done the work of putting sixteen of these together.)

The roster of stories represents the leading edge of new talent, leavened by people who were leading-edgers not long ago and are still far from ossified. In addition to the Cross, there are stories by Rick Shelley, George Zebrowski, first-timer Gary Konas, Robert Thurston, Ian Watson, Robert ("Touzalin") Reed, Martha Soukup, and Lucius Shepard. All of them have some extraordinary feature, be it of milieu or motivation, or simply some new wrinkle on SF, and I recommend the book unreservedly to those of you who want to know who the hot new talent are.

A pardonable note of pride: Martha Soukup is a First Prize winner in the Writers of The Future contest, and so will have another story to show you, in *Writers of The Future Vol. III,* out March-ish in 1987 and edited by Algis Budrys.

And another, plus some useful information: Under the name of "Robert Touzalin," Robert Reed appears in *W.O.F. II* with "Mudpuppies," the story that ultimately won a total of $5000 as the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award W.O.F. story of the year 1985. Shortly after getting a contract for his first novel, Reed decided to drop the Touzalin pen-name. He apparently did this while *Universe 16* was in production, because the dust-jacket copy refers only to Touzalin and the actual book text refers only to Reed, without any concording information. (The front cover portion of the jacket, in fact, declares that there are only five stories in the book.) Whatever, Reed's story here, like Soukup's, substantiates any claim to noteworthiness; both are deftly told intrinsically stefnal insights into the human emotions. Along with the other newcomers (and ex-newcomers) here, they give considerable hope to those of us who don't want to run out of good reading.

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The What-if-we'd-lost-WWII story has become not only an established but a strikingly populous genre within SF. It is even more populous now, because anthologists Benford and Greenberg went out and commissioned some new stories to mix in with the reprints in *Hitler Victorious,* a 299-page library bound, acid-free (so to speak) book, that is Garland's first trade book. Accustomed to selling by mail order to libraries, Garland has slotted this title into their Humanities Reference series and forgotten to either imprint or publicize a retail price, but I'm sure you can persuade your bookstore to order a copy or two. (Or, truth to tell, if your interests are purely recreational, you can wait for the Berkley paperback.)

But let us assume now, for this column addressed to serious students of the literature and its epiphenomena, that you are sufficiently intrigued by the theme to take considerable interest right now. You are not alone.

Of the reprints here, we find such famous works as Cyril Kornbluth's "Two Dooms," one of his last fully completed stories. (Contrary to an editorial implication in the book, the manuscript may have been rushed, as most magazine work was even as late as the 1950s, and Cyril may have thought to expand it into a novel at some time. But it is not a posthumous work in the sense of being a draft found in a late author's files and thus presumably not yet considered ready for submission.) Within those parameters, this is an expertly-told, thoroughly thought-through treatment within the genre. It is also a testament to the eagerness with which even top guns in the field wanted to appear in *Venture Science Fiction, F&SF's* short-lived but immortal companion magazine of that time.

Another classic — a truly shuddery one — is Keith Roberts' "Weinachtsabend;" Hilary Bailey's "The Fall of Frenchy Steiner" is very nearly as harrowing. And there is "Never Meet Again," by Algis Budrys, from *Infinity,* Larry Shaw's short-lived but immortal magazine of that time.

I was born in Nazi Germany, as a child observed Adolf Hitler's in-person effect on crowds of hitherto sane people, and so came easily to this writing . . . in fact, I believe, and have said, that watching those burghers turn into froth-mouthy werewolves is what disposed me to writing SF of any kind. All of that — very quietly — is implicit in my story, which I have always felt is one of my best short pieces. But what is it that causes us to continually pick at this topic?

Much textual matter in "Never Meet Again" is clearly derived from Ballantine's interminable series of Nazi war-memoir reprints. These flooded the stands in the 1950s, and in each of them General Von Schwantzkampf explained how he was (A) just a simple, patriotic military genius and (B) if those blundering

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Nazi bureaucrats hadn't failed him, he could have taken Stalingrad, occupied Moscow, and gone on to successfully invade China, the Phillipines, the Hawaiian Islands and then Hollywood by 1944.

The questions are Why were these memoirs so wildly popular that to this day there are attempts to reprint them yet again, What makes the swastika and the Wehrmacht-style steel helmet beloved of outlaw motorcyclists, and How come the Los Angeles Raiders wear black and silver?

To questions of this sort, Norman Spinrad offers answers, in his introduction introduced by Gregory Benford's introduction. As author of *The Iron Dream,* which is to my mind the definitive SF novel-length insight into the Nazi *geist,* Spinrad is to be taken seriously on this topic, and does an excellent job. But I'm not sure it's the last word.

The new(er) stories here — by Greg Bear, David Brin ("Thor Meets Captain America"), Brad Linaweaver, Sheila Finch, Howard Goldsmith, Tom Shippey and Gregory Benford, contain a lot of provocative reading that both affirms and contravenes all theses.

We are not done with this one yet. Some If-The-South-Had-Won stories share the ghostly fascinations wrapped around the Hitler events. But there is a major difference between Ward Moore's *Bring The Jubilee* and "Weinachtsabend" or *The Sound of His Horn* by "Sarban." The closer it gets to the psychic mechanisms, and the farther from war games, the more the Hitlerian genre becomes individual and peculiar to itself . . . and the more it seems to tell us that we will be looking into this one for many, many years to come.

In that light, one might well turn to an encyclopedic reference in search of data. Data on fantasy and horror films, on relevant authors, and on various key themes ("The Devil, Devils, Demons"; "Graveyard Poetry") is presented in the rather large, attractively designed, most certainly price-worthy *Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and The Supernatural.*

But it has its shortcomings. For instance, you will find no topic headings for *Famous Fantastic Mysteries, F&SF, Unknown,* or *Weird Tales.* Magazines as fantasy media are not part of editor Sullivan's foreground, whereas films definitely are. (I believe this is only in part because films furnish attractive stills to dress up the pages; the discussions of various films and directors appear well worth delving into, and to ask them to be impeccable in our particular eyes is to ask more than one gets from any encyclopedia in or out of SF).

I am troubled by the identification of Simone Simone as Simone Simon and conversely of Arthur J. Burks as Arthur J. Burkes. How many other letters "e" and their equivalent are roaming through the text?

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But as a fit companion for the Nicholls encyclopedia of science fiction (though they are in vastly different physical formats), Sullivan's effort here is a viable place from which to begin a reference library on its topic.

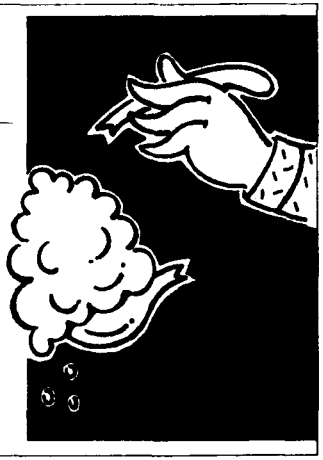
I *understand* that by the time you're reading this obsolescence will have eroded the first few pages of *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Engagement Calendar, 1987*. But surely a fair portion of the year remains, and there will be a 1988 version you could order.

Comb-bound to open easily and lie flat, interspersed with 65 bw photos of SF interest and SF people, some data on them, etc., this is a perfectly practical engagement calendar that will enable you to keep up with crucial SF birthdays and anniversaries while writing-in your own entries. The index serves also as a ready reference to birthdates, and there, surprise, *is* an order-blank for next year's book at $7.95 plus $1.25 postage and handling on the first copy ordered, 75 cents for each thereafter, New Jersey residents add 6% sales tax (on the $7.95), shipped September 15 and all that jazz.

Ever since Patti Perret's SF-author photo book from Bluejay — which we are all still autographing at convention after convention — people have been looking for a viable way to repackage that idea. Main Street — whatever that is, though the address leads me to suspect a bright college-based entrepreneur — has found a good, useful way. How do I know? I'm actually using mine.

Next time you feed your face, think about your heart.

Go easy on your heart and start cutting back on foods that are high in saturated fat and cholesterol. The change'll do you good.



American Heart Association
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Stephen Gallagher's previous F&SF stories have been dark fantasies, but here he turns to science fiction, with equally effective results. "Like Clockwork" is about an alien occupation that seems benign, if odd, until the day Jimmy Hirasaki gets a yellow form to report for surgery. . .

Like Clockwork

BY
STEPHEN GALLAGHER

I was down at the end of my drive, listening to George telling me all about the new house extension that he was going to build, when we saw the ambulance go by. Our street goes nowhere, just kind of turns around on itself in a crescent of five houses at the end, and so we knew that the ambulance had to be news for somebody. Besides, it had the logo of one of the alien franchises on the side, and this was only five years after the corporate wars.

Interested? I suppose we were. But you know what it's like out in the suburbs; most people do their watching from behind the curtains. It's bad form to stand out in the open and stare.

Even so, I couldn't help looking when George said, "It's stopping at Jimmy's place." I saw the ambulance glide to a halt and then turn about its own center before settling. It was, as George had said, outside the Hirasaki house, a white stuccoed villa on a corner plot with a low picket fence around it that wouldn't even stop a fat dachshund. The back of the ambulance opened up, and I saw that two young men were helping somebody out. It might have been Jimmy himself, but it was difficult to see; the front door opened, and Gloria Hirasaki came down to meet the three of them, generally getting in the way as the two men helped their patient to walk up the drive. He was weak, but he was managing.

"Was that Jimmy?" George said. "I couldn't make him out."

"Me neither," I said. "And I didn't hear anything about him being ill."

The reason for this being that he wasn't, and hadn't been; but I didn't get to discover the real explanation

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behind it until two days later, when George came knocking on my back door. I was in the kitchen stuffing trash bags — an all-day job, some weeks — when I heard the knock and looked up to see his shady figure on the other side of the bug screen. When I let him in, he seemed nervous.

"I just heard something today," he said, "and I'm not sure what to make of it."

I sat him down and offered him coffee. We had a new coffee maker that did away with beans and grinders and filters; you just shoveled garden dirt in at one end, and the machine pulled out the trace elements that it needed and did everything from there. It had used up most of our consumer points for a month, and given us a few weeks in which we could breathe easy. Half the problem that I always find is in making the space to store the stuff before we're allowed to throw it out.

But George didn't want coffee; he wanted to talk.

"I found out about Jimmy," he said. "He didn't go into the hospital because he was ill or anything. He went in because he got a yellow form."

"A yellow form for what?" I said. "I don't get it."

"Me neither. So, what do you say we go around there and find out?"

To understand the significance of a yellow form, you have to understand all about the corporate wars, and I'm not sure that I can explain them properly — I was just a ground gunner down at a base station in Grenada, and the nearest that we ever got to action was seeing a stricken alien cruiser shedding its bombload into the sea about five miles offshore in an attempt to regain height. It didn't make it, and we saw some *real* fireworks when it ditched some way farther on and the sea got into the drive unit. The evening sky was lit up by the flash, and nobody could hear a damn thing for about half an hour.

The first thing that you have to know about the corporate wars is that we lost. In fact, we lost earlier than we were supposed to, we later found out, and gave the aliens something of an economic crisis back home because of the way we'd messed up their long-term war plan for finance and resources. Not that we were ready to apologize — we were just waiting with our teeth gritted and our eyes screwed shut and our entire arsenal blown off into space, waiting for that final hammer to fall.

When the coup de grace didn't come and we finally opened our eyes, it was to find our bombed cities being rebuilt and our entire economy in the process of being restructured. Here, it seemed, was the reason why the aliens had never gone nuclear; they wanted us intact, and they wanted us to function. They never actually made any public appearances, preferring to work through human franchise

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operations. When I collected my discharge papers, they were accompanied by the first yellow form I ever saw; it told me where to find my new home, and contained a list of thinly veiled threats about what would happen if I didn't move in. I hitchhiked there expecting to find some squalid billet, and found instead the kind of place that I couldn't have afforded on my before-the-war salary even if I'd lived on bread and water for twenty years. It had eight rooms, a big yard, and space for a pool. Gabrielle was already inside and waiting for me; I hadn't seen her since the start of the conflict, and somehow our reunion seemed unreal. We lay on blankets on the floor that night, looking out at the moon through uncurtained windows and trying to make sense of it all. The next morning we found another yellow form lying on the mat, *instructing* us to go out and choose furniture. We hitched out to the new warehouses that had been built in the rubble on the old outskirts of town, and found ourselves wandering around amongst crowds of similarly dazed and uncomprehending couples. That was almost the last time we had to hitch anywhere, because the next day two yellow forms sent us out to look for a car each.

And that was it, the fate of the losers; we simply had to sit tight and receive gifts, lots of them. We got a certain number of credit points every month that we could spend as we chose, unless another yellow form came and directed us to a purchase over which we had no choice. Some of the yellow-form goods were really weird, alien artifacts that we could find no earthly use for, but we still had to go and pick them up. We could throw them out after a specified length of time; the one thing that we couldn't do was refuse them. It was a strange way to find yourself living, in the shadow of all-out war, but after that stunned and confusing first year, it seemed that most people were finding their pride an awfully small stone to swallow, and seizing their new life-style with both hands and no questions asked.

Me, I had no complaints either. As former active service personnel, people like me were right up there at the head of the line. After two years they moved us into an even bigger house, twelve rooms and no problem in filling them all. We weren't allowed to move our stuff; we had to junk everything and start all over again. Gabrielle cried a little as we watched some of the pieces burn, but it wasn't like anything was irreplaceable.

And when a yellow form came, you didn't argue.

Now, I didn't know the Hirasakis well; I didn't even know George all that well, when it really came down to it. We lived close and we were friendly, but that isn't the same as real friendship. I'd never seen George worried in the way that he was now,

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and I suppose that helped it to get me, too. A yellow form and an ambulance made a disturbing combination.

One of the alien skimmers passed overhead as we walked toward the Hirasaki house. Their patrols are frequent, but they're not regular, or at least I've never been able to make out any pattern in them. This one came by low and cruised on out of sight beyond the rooftops, and then a few seconds later it popped back into sight in the middle distance heading out across the bay toward the middle of town. They'd no windows and they never landed, so the chances of actually seeing an alien were nil; but everybody knew by now how they could find you and burn you up inside your own home without even scorching the wallpaper, and that made them a potent tool of enforcement. George and I watched it until it was right out over the Transliner tracks and unlikely to swing around and come back, and then we crossed the street and walked up Jimmy Hirasaki's driveway.

I didn't know how Gloria Hirasaki was going to react to the two of us turning up like this, but when she opened the door, it was almost as if she'd been half-expecting a visit. She seemed pleased and nervous at the same time. "Jimmy's getting stronger every day," she said. "He came downstairs on his own this morning. He'll be really happy to see you."

And then she led the way into the house, which was like walking from day into night. All the blinds in the place had been drawn, and no lights had been switched on; and as she closed the door behind us, I had a panicky few seconds of total blindness until my eyes began to adjust and perceive that the blackout wasn't quite as complete as it had first seemed. There was a yellow glimmer ahead in the lounge.

It came from a small shaded lamp on the table beside Jimmy Hirasaki, who was sitting in a big wing chair. My first guess, that he had some kind of eye problem, seemed to be proved wrong by the presence of an open comic book on his knees. But that was about all that I could see of him, because the light from the lamp had been cut down with a towel draped over the shade, and his face was lost in the even deeper shadows of the chair.

"Jimmy?" George said doubtfully, peering into the gloom.

"Hello, George," Jimmy said. "I'm glad you came over. Both of you."

"What happened?" I said. "We saw the ambulance. Did you have an accident, or what?"

"No accident," Jimmy said. He sounded hoarse, but he didn't sound weak. "I'm sorry about the lights; they're more for Gloria's benefit than anything else. I don't look quite the way I used to. It's not easy for her to adjust."

George said, "We heard about you

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getting a yellow form. You know what it's like; we're starting to wonder what's ahead for the rest of us. What did you have to buy, Jimmy?"

"A little surgery," Jimmy said, and I felt something down in my gut start to flicker and tremble.

"Surgery for what?" George persisted, and I sensed, rather than saw, that Jimmy was starting to move.

"One or two improvements that they decided we need," he said, and he drew away the towel that was covering the lamp.

Jimmy came out onto the street for the first time about a week later, by which time the story had broken everywhere. The appearance of a so-called convert was still news, but it was no longer hot news. They were coming out all over the city, and to everybody except the people who knew them well, they looked reassuringly normal. Jimmy wasn't self-conscious about it, but I could see Gloria looking around with that nervous half-smile as if she couldn't trust herself to be able to tell a gesture of friendship from a threat of attack. The changes were disconcerting to see, but the shock of that first impression when he'd taken the cover from the lamp began to fade from me at the first touch of daylight.

Jimmy was half-Japanese, as you might expect, and he'd never actually been tall or brawny, but now he had a good four or five inches on me and moved with the quiet power of a professional athlete, without the injuries. His voice, now that the hoarseness was gone, gave you a little thrill when you heard it; standing next to him was what a lot of people imagine being in the presence of a big movie star must be like. You felt awed and nervous, somehow privileged just to be so close.

Inferior, I think is the word that best describes it.

That had to be the reason why so many simply picked up their yellow forms and went in without complaint. A few kicked and screamed, but then a skimmer would hover overhead and ensure docility as the police brought them out of their homes. Others didn't wait around, but booked themselves in without even waiting to be yellow-carded. I saw little of the panic and fear that I'd have expected, and I suspect that the reason was a simple one. I glimpsed some of its truth one evening as I watched Gabrielle through the open bedroom door. She was sitting in front of the dressing-table mirror, and I don't think she even knew that I was there. She was gazing into her own eyes and pinching thoughtfully at the skin of her neck. She'd read somewhere that this was a way to break up any fat that might be starting to form, and I remember once telling her that if she wasn't careful, she'd end up looking like a turkey in a dog collar. She'd

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laughed at this, but not too hard. What should have been some of our best years had been lost to the war; but now it seemed that our conquerors had devised a way of giving them back to us.

I'd asked Jimmy what the process entailed, and if there was any pain involved. He told me that he hadn't known a thing about it until it had all been over. All that he knew about the procedure was something that he'd overheard from one of the surgical franchise technicians, something about a "first-stage peel and rewire job." It was a phrase that I somehow couldn't get out of my mind as I waited out the following weeks.

The way that it worked out, Gabrielle went first. My call came a few days later, and to a different franchise. From the way I understood the small print, the cost in consumer points would be phenomenal, but monthly payments would still leave us with a decent margin to live on. And, what the hell, it was all imaginary anyway; they sold us the stuff and they also gave us the wherewithal to pay for it, and if that was how you had to behave when you won a war, perhaps it was better to be a loser any day.

They didn't have to send a skimmer for me, or anything. I put some clean underwear and a paperback book into a little bag, and presented myself at the Foresight Building.

• • •

"I'm giving you a couple of shots," Foresight told me. "They'll kill any pain and they'll also get you over the initial weakness."

"I'm not in any pain," I said, hearing my new voice for the first time.

"You get the shots anyway," the doc said.

I'd been expecting something high-tech and sterile and impressive, but I'd been wrong. I was lying on a mean little cot in a windowless brick chamber that I shared with four others; the ceiling was vaulted, and my guess was that I was in some corner of the cellar. Sounds echoed when somebody coughed or groaned, and light was from a single naked bulb.

I wanted to see myself, but really, all that I could see were my hands, and then not too well because of the low wattage of the overhead light. The shots made me feel dull and happy, and after an hour or so, two attendants came and helped me up from the cot and took me outside to walk up and down the corridor. This was just as dark and as grim as the room that I'd left, the floor plain stone and the walls all soot-stained. Others were being walked as well, shambling golden giants with their unaltered supporters at either side, and as I stumbled the exhausting length of the passageway, I looked in vain for a mirror.

When I was back in the dank room, they ran a few checks on me and then asked if I wanted anything to

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help me sleep. I said I didn't need anything, that I was whacked, and again I heard the sound of my own, strangely enhanced voice.

I think I was probably asleep before they even left me.

I couldn't remember anything of the procedure, not from the time that I'd rolled up my sleeve for the needle. When that had happened, I'd still been fully dressed and out in the overcrowded reception area, so presumably I must have been walking around and cooperating for at least a while after that — but nothing of it seemed to have stayed with me, and all that I could do was to lie there and wonder. I was alert, and there was a kind of tingling sensation in my mind, and I thought that perhaps I should have taken that third shot after all, as there seemed to be no chance now of sleep returning. I still felt no pain; in fact, I felt pretty good. Not strong, but generally O.K.

After lying there for a while longer, I decided that I felt well enough to go looking for a mirror.

The passageway was empty now, and I guessed that it was probably night. I got more than halfway along before I realized that the expedition was a mistake, and by then I didn't have the energy to make it all the way back. I supported myself on the crumbly wall and pressed on toward the lights at the end, hoping that I'd find somewhere to sit for a while. If I didn't, then I'd just have to slide down and sit on the cold floor, from where I doubted that I'd be able to rise again.

The end of the passageway opened off into a whitewashed chamber that had been fixed up as an office; a barred street-level window in the far wall confirmed that we were at basement level, and that it was, indeed, after dark. Doc Foresight was sitting behind his desk, morosely contemplating a clipboard. He looked up when I came around the corner.

"You," he said.

I had eyes only for the empty chair that I could see on the other side of the desk from him. I lurched over and dropped into it gratefully. I said, "You don't look happy, Doc."

"Of course I'm happy," he said bitterly. "I'm a rich man." And he tossed the clipboard over onto the desk, not caring too much whether it hit anything else.

I said, "Perhaps you can explain something to me. I've tried to make it out and I can't make any sense of it, but you're a franchise holder, so maybe you'll know. They attack us and beat us. Then they set us up again and start pumping in all this investment. But they never ask for anything back."

Foresight leaned back in his chair. He was small and dark, not gray, but a lot of the way toward going bald. He said. "So, what's your question?"

"I'd have thought it was obvious. What's in it for them?"

He looked up at the whitewashed

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ceiling and then he shrugged, delicately.

"Survival, I suppose," he said.

"Survival how?"

But then he smiled, sadly, like a teacher might at a simple question that even years of study couldn't answer. "I don't understand big money," he said. "I don't even understand lending to pisspoor little countries who've got no hope of even paying the interest, just so they can use it to buy stuff that your own factories are overproducing. I suppose if you want the true explanation, you'll find it somewhere in the gap between real life and bookkeeping."

"You're kidding me," I said.

"That they needed to expand their markets so much that it was worth fighting a war and then giving the stuff away to make it happen? All right, so I'm kidding you. I'm a rich man; what do I care what you think? And what are you doing wandering around here anyway?"

I said, "I came out to look for a mirror."

"There aren't any."

"Why not?"

He took a deep breath, almost a sigh. "Because people kept looking in them and then thanking me. I don't want any more of that."

I couldn't understand his attitude, and I said so. He stared at me thoughtfully for a while, with an odd kind of half-amused expression that I wasn't sure I liked. Then he went over to his pharmacy cupboard and loaded up a hypodermic; the shot that he gave me seemed to wash all the tiredness out of my limbs again, but he warned me that the effect wouldn't last.

Then he said, "Come and see exactly what it is you'd be thanking me for."

Ten minutes later I was back in the same seat, wanting to be sick but finding that my new body wouldn't cough up the goods. I'm not used to seeing that kind of stuff, and it had upset me far more than I'd imagined. The process was almost fully automated, carried out by programmed franchise equipment that was working on through the night while the rest of us slept; two converts had been at the halfway stage, the worst possible stage at which to view the process. It wasn't surgery; it was butchery.

"It isn't enhancement," Foresight explained as I sat there with my head in my hands, thinking that I'd gone through the same procedures only hours before; "it's major replacement. Only the brain and maybe 10 percent of the internal body mass are carried over . . . and they can even scan and remodel the brain, in extreme cases."

I asked him what had happened to . . . well, to the *rest* of me.

He said, "Broken up for spares. Nothing's wasted, and it'll be a long time before converts make up any significant proportion of the population."

"Can I see them?"

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"You wouldn't want to," he said, and he came over and put a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. "Would you like me to give you something to forget what you saw? I can, as long as it's done straightaway."

"No," I said, "I don't want to forget." And so instead he helped me to stand so that I could go back to bed. The injected stimulant was starting to wear off, as he'd said it would.

And as I got to my feet, I saw the clipboard that he'd been studying and tossed onto his desk when I'd arrived. On top of the bundle of invoices under the clip was a yellow form, and the yellow form had Foresight's name on it.

The change in Gabrielle was the hardest to take, because it affected me the most sharply. She looked almost the way that she had when I'd first seen her, years before at her sister's wedding and quite some time before we'd started to get serious. I don't think she'd even been quite sixteen then. She spent a lot of those first couple of weeks before the bedroom mirror, not in sadness as she had before, but with her eyes filled with tears of disbelief. I'd taken a long, hard look in that same mirror once, but now I tended to avoid it. The eyes were reassuringly my own, but the rest was . . . well, I don't know *what* it was. It wasn't me, that was for sure.

I didn't tell Gabrielle what I'd seen. She said that she'd signed for a number of extras, expensive additions to the process, and I said that it didn't matter. Which it didn't — we weren't exactly spending money of our own, and the true damage lay in the conversion itself, not in the add-ons or the extra enzymes or the built-in glands that could secrete uppers or downers at will.

The plans that I had to tell George disappeared within a couple of days of him getting home. He was totally won over. He'd always been small and kind of runty, and he'd once told me about some childhood illness he'd had that had twisted his back so that he didn't take his shirt off in public, even on a beach. It didn't show, but you couldn't tell him that. For George, it must have been like going to sleep a frog and waking up a prince. The knowledge that I had, I realized, was slowly driving a wedge between me and the rest of the converted world. "Looking good," George would call across to me when we both appeared out-of-doors, and I'd think of my true body split up into raw chunks and tagged in Foresight's deep freeze, waiting for a cancer case or the victim of some industrial accident amongst the work force who carried no alien credit.

This was a side of life that I was going to see more of, when the bills for Gabrielle's "extras" came in.

But before that, I have to tell you

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about one afternoon when I went over to see George, the afternoon that I finally realized that my thoughts of him as a possibly ally would have to be wiped from my mind forever.

Mary showed me through to the back, to their new cedar-decked sunroom with its glass roof and sliding-control blinds. George was lying on one of those tubular aluminium loungers, but the blinds had been drawn against the sun, and instead he was under an angled lamp that washed him with a faintly greenish glow. We had one just like it at home; it had been one of the must-buys a couple of months ago, and I'd been waiting the required time until I could throw it out, because I'd rigged it up and tried it and found it to be useless for any purpose that I could imagine.

I said as much to George, and he said, "No, you're wrong; just put your hand under." So I did. My hand began to tingle and to experience a feeling of deep warmth, and I drew it back quickly. My unconverted body had felt nothing in the rays, nothing at all.

"It's about five times better than sunshine," George said, and lazily turned himself over on the lounger to lie facedown like a dog in the midday desert. He sighed loudly and contentedly, obviously feeling so good that it didn't much matter to him whether I was there or not.

I was staring at his exposed back. I'd seen it before, only a couple of days after he'd returned from his conversion, but now it was different. Something was pushing up under the skin around either shoulder, two body-length, parallel structures that were pressing up tight like new knuckles at the top and threatening to split their way through. The skin had been stretched so thinly that I could almost make out the complexity of gristle and sinew beneath. They seemed to be causing him no discomfort at all; so sensitive before, he didn't even seem to be aware of this new disfigurement.

I didn't wait around or ask him about them, but my own shoulders were starting to itch, and as soon as I got into the house, I ran into the bedroom and tore off my shirt and twisted myself around so that I could get a look in the mirror. I saw nothing out of the ordinary, just a back that would have made a lifeguard's look puny; no bumps, no marks, no signs of anything growing there. Feeling foolish and troubled at the same time, I walked through the rooms where all of the useless must-buys were stacked, donning my shirt and wondering how many of those apparently useless goods would turn out to have new applications for the converted. Some of the boxes and cases had been reopened, I noticed, and I went on through to look for Gabrielle.

I found her out on the patio, lying naked under that same design of lamp. Its glow gave her the look of some ancient bronze of a goddess, raised

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after centuries on a seabed. It was a shock to find her out-of-doors like this, because although the patio was fairly private, it wasn't particularly well screened; it was something that I couldn't even imagine her having considered before.

But that had been before. Now, as she became aware of me, she looked up at me and smiled; and I saw the rapid blink of a milky inner eyelid, a quick flick-across that was almost too fast to make out.

It struck me as frightening, and deeply disturbing.

And — I have to say it — it struck me as something alien, in every sense of the word.

The end of the month came, and with it came the accounting. I was dismayed to find that Gabrielle hadn't only ordered extras in her conversion, but that she'd gone out and signed for quite a lot of new warehouse goods as well; dismayed, because for the first time ever, our charges were in excess of our allowance. I didn't know what I was supposed to do in a case like this. Given the size of the allowance, I hadn't even thought that it would be possible.

I thought that we might ride it out for another month, cut back on our outgoings and hope that it would all balance up, but that didn't work. I'd tried to talk to Gabrielle about it, and she'd seemed to listen; but when I saw the new figures, I realized that she hadn't. That was the evening that I saw Jimmy Hirasaki for the first time in a while, just a glimpse at one of his windows in the cool October night, but enough to register the gross distortion that had taken place in his body and to wonder at the strange, birdlike spread of his silhouette.

It was also the evening that I stripped off again before the bedroom mirror and reached over to run my hands over my shoulders, this time feeling the hard projections that were growing like small apples under the skin.

My new body stayed calm, and wouldn't respond to the spiritual terror that I was experiencing; others around me hardly seemed to notice the changes in themselves, and so were unlikely to react with much sympathy to mine. When I went over to talk to George, he immediately assumed that my debts were the main source of my worries.

"Don't get in a state over it," he said. He was sitting forward on the edge of his sofa, as if it was uncomfortable for him to lean back. The projections on his shoulders had grown even further and now strained at the material of his shirt, like the wings of a moth as it begins to burst from its shell, and I noticed that his hands had become longer and bonier as if the flesh was falling away to reveal claws inside. "The same thing's happening all over town. All you have to do is sign up on a work gang, put in the few days you need to make up the dif-

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ference, and then quit when you're even." And then he smiled a viper's smile. "You remember work, don't you?"

Yes, I remembered work. I didn't miss it much, but I remembered it. The work gangs that George was referring to were mostly transient laborers who cleared land for the new warehouses, or else they went out along the Transliner routes to build bridges and supply depots. Sometimes it seemed that the whole world was becoming a machine, a one-way device for commerce and consumption. So far the gangs had consisted entirely of those who got no credit from the conquerors, the fringe people in their shanties on the edge of town, and I wondered how they'd react to finding a convert standing in line with them; but from the way that George was talking, it sounded as if I wouldn't be the first, and my guess was that I'd be a long way from being the last.

"Just consider the alternative," he said, and for a moment I could see the old George in that resculpted face. "The alternative is a visit from one of the skimmers. We can sit here and we can talk about what's fair and what's right, but when it comes down to it, *that's* the reality we have to deal with."

I managed to stick with it for one day.

It wasn't the work, which consisted of bending wire and pouring concrete underground for a Transliner subway; my rebuilt body coped with ease, and I was hardly even tired at the end of the shift. It was more the stark terror that I saw in the faces of the unconverted when they looked at me, their refusal to meet my eyes or even to speak to me if contact could be avoided; and when once there was a muttering of resentment that even I could barely hear, it was answered with the sudden appearance of a skimmer at the tunnel's end. It hovered for a few seconds, cutting out the daylight to enhance its menace with darkness, and then it was gone.

I knew only that I couldn't live like this. I'd think about the days before the war and I'd want to weep, but my body wouldn't allow it.

It was then that I realized, there was a way. It meant losing everything that I had and starting again . . . but what did I have, really? Gabrielle was no longer Gabrielle, and was becoming even less so every day. I had no friends. I owned nothing that was truly worth having.

So one evening, when the sky was clear and the stars were pin-bright and there was nowhere for a skimmer to hide unseen, I made my way across town to the Foresight Building and broke in.

I'm sorry," Foresight said. "I can't do it."

"You mean you won't?"

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"I can't, that's all."

"Is it the money?"

"No," he said, "it isn't the money."

Getting in had been easy. I'd been able to rip an entire window of bars out of the brickwork, with barely a sound. I'd found Foresight as I had before, in his whitewashed below-ground office, sitting out the night alone. He was, as yet, still unconverted. *You,* he'd said simply when he saw me, showing no surprise but seeming to recognize me straightaway, almost as if I'd been expected.

So then I'd explained what I wanted him to do, convincing myself as I spoke that it had to be possible, and then had come his flat refusal.

"But why?" I said. "Is it because you don't keep track of the pieces?"

"We keep records," he said. "And yes, the procedure's feasible. But believe me, you don't want to know why I can't help you."

You don't want to know; he'd said that to me once before and I'd insisted, and what I'd seen as a result had been a part of my ruin. But anything else would have meant living in the shadow of the truth without ever seeing its shape, and because I detected a trace of sympathy behind Foresight's turndown, I knew that I had to keep at him. He stalked off down one of the brick corridors to make some late checks on his clientele, and I went after.

My request? It seemed simple enough. I wanted him to rebuild me.

After what I'd seen in his surgical rooms, I didn't doubt that the technique was there, all fully automated and error-free on the franchise equipment, and I could be pretty sure of being whole again except for a few scars. I'd thought it through, and it didn't seem too likely, given the glut of spare parts that must have accompanied the conversion program, that any of the pieces would be unavailable. The main difficulty as I saw it wasn't practical; it was social.

I couldn't go back, not to live as the only human being in a house in a street of monsters, but I also doubted that I'd be allowed simply to disappear. The way out, as I saw it, lay in an offhand remark of Foresight's; he'd said that in extreme cases the copying and enhancement process could also be applied to the brain, and I didn't see why my case shouldn't be considered as far-gone as any. I could duck out and find whatever new life lay ahead for me, whilst my functioning double could return to live out the old.

"Come on, Foresight," I said, "you *owe* me." And that stopped him, wearily, in his tracks.

"And how do you arrive at that conclusion?" he said.

"You converted me. And then, as if that wasn't enough, you let me see what I was. All I'm asking is to be restored; it's maybe four hours' work for those machines, and then less to rig up a copy. I won't tell, and I cer-

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tainly won't be coming back. So where's your problem?"

He turned to me then. And I realized that what I'd seen in him wasn't sympathy; it was pity.

"The problem is that it's all too late," he said. "You came up with all these ideas and arguments on the night of your conversion, but you don't even remember. You want to know *why* you don't remember?"

"Tell me," I said.

"Because what you're asking for, I already did. And the reason why you don't remember is because you *are* the copy."

I remember lying on my cot, alone in that narrow basement room, listening to them as they argued on the other side of the door; my doctor and my double, swapping a few hard truths but with the harshness mostly going in one direction only. I was afraid that Foresight was going to fling open the door and point to me as proof, lying there still weak and with the stitch marks still on me, but he didn't. I'd been crawling back to strength for months, and still had some way to go; no rapid recoveries for the true flesh. Foresight came in later and said that he'd gone, and that I wasn't to worry. He said that he was going to give me something that would help me sleep, when what he really meant was that he was going to give me something that would *make* me sleep. I was damn sure I wasn't going to manage it on my own, that night.

Some time later, when I was walking again and the day of my leaving was coming somewhere into sight, the doc tried to explain it to me. He explained that my double was less than human, and that the anguish it seemed to experience was no more real than that of one of his lab animals. Emotional clockwork, he called it, and the phrase became a kind of talisman for me, something that I repeated to myself whenever I sensed the guilt beginning to rise again.

I had to leave town, because I couldn't take the risk of being seen by anyone who'd known me, and so I took a series of jobs before settling as one of a Transliner bridge maintenance gang right at the other end of the country. They were hard, miserable days at first, eased only by a constant exhaustion that kept me from thinking too much. I kept out of the cities now, unable to suppress the panic that I felt whenever I saw the slowly mutating forms of the converted, and got myself a more or less permanent room in a run-down building that had formerly been a bombed-out tourist hotel.

"You heard the rumors?" Eloise said to me one day at the end of the shift. Eloise was our team boss, and had been a frontline medic in the wars. Born suspicious and perhaps

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made a little healthily loopy by the mayhem she'd seen, she'd destroyed her unit's service records at the end of the conflict in the belief that military personnel were likely to be the first targets for alien extermination squads. Most of her people made up the team that I was working in now.

"Rumors?" I said. "What rumors?"

"They're doming the cities," she said. "Can you imagine it? Domed cities, just like in the stories, so the Masters won't have to walk in our sunshine."

"They don't anyway," I said.

I still don't know whether she was serious or not. I'd come to like Eloise, but I still wasn't sure that I had the hang of her sense of humor. As I hitched a ride with a 'liner to get home at the end of the day, I was wondering if I could get to know her better; she'd shown an interest in my scars that I sensed wasn't purely professional. When I thought of Gabrielle now, it was as you'd think of someone who no longer lived; perfect in memory, the memory being that of the first night in our unfurnished new home with the war over and a safe future assured.

But what future *was* there, really? Eloise said that things had to stabilize soon, to reach a livable balance, and I believed her. But how it would happen, I honestly couldn't say.

I found out when I got home that evening.

There was an envelope lying on the bed, actually on the pillow, which annoyed me because I didn't like anybody going into the room when I wasn't there. I'd nothing worth taking, but that wasn't the point. The envelope was blank, I noticed as I tore it open.

Out came a yellow form. On the yellow form, my new name.

And as I stood at the window looking out into the cold, cold sunset, my hands in my pockets and my heart like a stone, I watched the distant lights of a skimmer as it hovered and probed and made its slow patrol of the city outskirts. I knew that it was only my imagination, but, sketched out against the sky behind it, I seemed to see the faint ghost-image of a rising pattern of latticework. It was curved like the beginnings of a dome, and dark like a shadow of tomorrow.

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John Morressy ("Spirits from the Vasty Deep," December 1986) offers a wonderful new story about Conhoon of the Three Gifts, a wizard who did not, in general, approve of spell-removal but who is tempted by the unusual challenge of a man whose daughter is turned into a rat. . .

The Quality of Murphy

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

Conhoon of the Three Gifts had strict principles, and he lived by them. He was, to put it plainly, a hard man and a hard wizard.

He dwelt alone, in austere surroundings that matched his hard ways. Not even an animal shared his solitude: dogs were too friendly for his taste, cats unnecessary, and rats and mice terrified of his reputation. A few spiders who kept to their webs in high, dark corners, and a score or so of fat black beetles who lived damp and uneventful lives under old chests, were his sole companions. Conhoon preferred it that way.

Though he was a charter member of the Wizards' Guild, Conhoon saw as little of his wizardly colleagues as he did of anyone else. He was vexed by the way things were going in the profession, and had no wish to be further vexed by hearing self-righteous defenses of behavior that to him was indefensible. Lifting spells was getting to be a popular line these days, and the very notion went against Conhoon's instincts.

Wizards put spells on people. That's what they were trained to do. It was right and proper for them to do so. Wizards did not remove spells, or soften them, or change them into something more convenient. Spell them fast, spell them hard, and keep them spelled, and if there's no time for a spell, curse them as soundly as you can: that was a wizard's work, as Conhoon saw it.

But others were seeing it differently, and their number was growing. So was their influence, even within the guild, where too many people were more interested in pleasing the public than in upholding standards. The profession was falling apart. So

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was everything else, for that matter. Conhoon had tried to warn them a century or more ago, but no one listened.

Let them learn the hard way, Conhoon said to himself. Let them go about lifting spells, canceling curses, mollycoddling everyone, and before they know it there will be no fear of wizards left in the world, and soon after that no wizards at all, and it will serve them right for not heeding the words of Conhoon.

Pleased with these thoughts, Conhoon helped himself to a second dish of thick porridge. He was scarcely halfway through it when he heard faint hoofbeats off in the distance. He muttered under his breath, all pleasure fled, and angrily gulped down a sizable clot of porridge. The hoofbeats were louder. Someone was coming. The hoofbeats stopped, and in a very little time Conhoon heard the squilching of footsteps through the muck that surrounded his hovel.

"I seek the wizard Conhoon," an unhappy voice called.

Working a quick spell against unfriendly ingress, the wizard opened just a crack a window overlooking the boggy desolation that was his front yard. "Conhoon is my name. And what is yours?" he said.

"Men call me Ru of the Black Thumbnail," came the response.

"I did not ask what men call you, I asked your name, and that is often a different case altogether. I will ask once more: What is your name?"

"I am . . . ," the visitor began, but then was still. He looked about uneasily, and his hand went to his sword hilt. He was a slender man, sallow-faced and dark-haired, and his eyes were quick and suspicious. "Where are you now? Why should I tell you my name?" he demanded.

"Speak up, boyo, and stop wasting the time of a wizard, or you will have a curse on you that —"

"Scoggery! My name is Scoggery!' the man cried in alarm.

"Now that is more like it. And what is your business with me, Scoggery? Move away from the trees, if you please, and into the open, the way I can keep my eye on you."

The man moved. "My master has sent me to consult you about a curse." "Is it a curse you're after? A fine curse I have, to blight a troublesome neighbor's land and give his cattle the staggers and cause spots on his daughters and hernias to his sons and mildew to his grain, and all in a single night's time. Oh, a lovely curse it is. And cheap."

"We already have a curse. My master wants it lifted."

Conhoon flung the window wide and stuck his head out. The morning sun gleamed off his bald pate. His untidy white beard waggled as he shook his fist and howled, "What is wrong with everyone these days? When I was a lad, half the people in the land were cursed, and they got along. They

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did not go running off to the nearest wizard, whining and complaining; they gritted their teeth and lived with their curse, and counted themselves lucky that things were no worse. But people these days . . . ." He trailed off into a growl and a wordless utterance of disgust.

"It is a very nasty curse, this one," said Scoggery after a cautious silence.

"That is the nature of curses, boyo."

"Nastier than most, this one. A foreigner's curse it is."

"Do you tell me so?" said Conhoon. The anger and scorn in his voice slowly yielded to a hint of interest. "And who is it coming around here and putting foreign curses on our own?"

"It was a djinnee did it."

"A djinnee? One of them out of a brass bottle from far Araby, and him with a rag around his head, and the droopy drawers, and all?"

"The very same."

Conhoon leaned on the windowsill and dug the fingers of his left hand thoughtfully into his tangled beard, dislodging, among other things, bits of oatmeal. A darting sparrow caught one morsel as it fell, and flew off as others of his kind gathered. Conhoon ignored the display of avian dexterity. At last he disengaged his fingers and said, "Come you in. I will hear more about this djinnee and his cursing."

Scoggery entered the hovel with gingerly steps, looking about for whatever hideous apparitions might be lurking in corners, or behind, beneath, or between items of furniture. He saw nothing to alarm him. Aside from the usual trash and disarray of a batchelor's habitation, there were only heaps and stacks of ancient books randomly placed. With a commanding gesture, Conhoon directed him to a seat at the table. Scoggery looked longingly on the half-empty porringer.

"There is a great hunger on me, wizard, and a thirst that has the tongue of me tasting like the bottom of a beggar's boot," he said in a mournful voice.

"Unfortunate for you that I have no wish to listen to the discourse of a man with his mouth full of food. Do you tell me about this djinnee and the manner of the cursing, and then we will consider food and drink."

"Give us a sup of water, at least," said Scoggery piteously. "Not a drop have I had since break of day."

"When I was a lad, there was no drinking of water till the day's work was done, and then we got no more than would fit in the cup of your hand. But the people these days. . . ." Conhoon ended in a low, reproachful growl. He pointed to a bucket by the fireplace, from which the handle of a dipper protruded.

Scoggery eagerly drank down one dipperful, gave a prolonged exhalation of breath expressive of pleasure, then dipped out a second and finished that as well. Another sigh of repletion fol-

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lowed. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he took his seat once again.

"You've had your water. Tell of the djinnee," Conhoon said.

"I will," Scoggery replied, settling his bottom and placing his hands and forearms on the table, leaning forward, assuming a grave expression. "My master is Mirmul of the Long Face, and him the eighth gloomiest man in Ireland, exceeded in cheerlessness only by Mad Sweeney and the seven hermits of the well of Tráig Dhâa Bhan. But the curse that is upon him now well may jump him over the hermits and put him up there with Sweeney, for his only daughter, the dark-eyed Blai, has been turned into a rat. A terrible rat she is, too, a ratty rat with a long twisty snout and a tail like a dirty bit of string and fleas beyond the numbering hopping about on her slimy, filthy pelt — and it all the doing of a sway-bellied, fat-fingered, greasy-nosed djinnee who should have been on his scabby knees groveling in thanks for the kindness of my master in releasing him from the lousy stinking brass bottle that was his prison for the past three thousand years; but the likes of him, I ask you now, what do they know about gratitude?"

"A rat, you tell me? That is a bad curse to put on a man's daughter," said Conhoon, his face hardening in disapproval.

"A bad curse indeed. The gloom of Mirmul is enough to make the sun set in the morning and the milk sour in the very pouring of it."

"It is the custom in civilized nations to curse beautiful princesses by turning them into toads, in which state they can at least make themselves useful by the catching of flies. There is little to be done with a rat."

"Devil a thing at all," said Scoggery, shaking his head.

Conhoon wagged a denunciatory finger in Scoggery's face. "And doesn't it serve your master right for getting involved with a djinnee in the first place? What would a djinnee know about toads, and him from a country that is all sand, with a sun that would bake the skin off you? They are a backward class of spirit, and foreigners besides."

"But it was not my master's doing, wizard. It was a trick of Fiacha the Far-Traveled, who gave him the brass bottle, all polished and shining like fairy gold in moonlight, and said there would be a great surprise for the man who could pull out the stopper of it. Fiacha has long borne a grudge against my master."

"That is well known to all."

"But just this past summer, didn't Mirmul go hunting with his fine hounds and capture the great wolf of Glen mBolcàin that slew the three brothers of Fiacha, and bring it to live as a pet in his castle?"

"Did he, now?"

"He did, and great was the annoyance of Fiacha thereat, and fearful the

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vengeance he swore when the news was brought to him. But in time he grew calm, and honeyed were the words of him. My good master accepted the brass bottle as a peace offering, and the treachery of Fiacha has lost him his daughter, and only you can help him," Scoggery said, joining his hands on the tabletop in a gesture of hopeful appeal.

"I am not your man for unspelling or disenchantment," said the wizard flatly. "In view of the circumstances, I would be willing to increase the size of the rat Blai tenfold and provide her with a charm against any and all defenses employed by Fiacha, and do it all at a price your master would hardly notice, but that is as far as I go."

"You are the man, wizard," Scoggery repeated doggedly.

"I am not. The lifting of spells and curses is work I leave to others, and eager they are to do it."

"Did you not undo a great curse that had three counties crawling with mice and moles?"

"I did that, and it near cost me my life for the weakness it left upon me," said Conhoon, frowning and rubbing a faint scar on the crown of his bald head. "I do no more in that line."

"But you must. You are the man for this job, wizard."

Conhoon shook his head. "Out of neighborly feeling, and at no cost to your master," he said, "I will provide you with the name of a wizard who deals in such affairs. He lives across the sea, he and his wife, but I will give you good directions to their very doorstep."

"They will not do."

"He is a wizard as good as myself, and she is a beautiful and kindhearted woman with lovely speech to her. They are experienced in these matters, and too soft for their own good sometimes, if you ask me, but they are the ones you want."

Scoggery was steadfast. "The wisest man in Mirmul's kingdom has said that only a pooka can deal with djinn and their curses, and only the wizard Conhoon can deal with a pooka. So there it is."

Conhoon worked his fingers into his beard. His digital progress was momentarily impeded by an egg-yolk-stiffened barrier of bristles, but so deep in thought was he that he scarcely noticed the obstruction. A light hail of food particles pattered to the tabletop, landing unnoticed. At length, Conhoon placed his palms on the table and rose, saying with solemn voice, "If the ollav has said this, I will not dispute it."

"Then you will help my master!" Scoggery cried joyously.

"I will seek a pooka of my acquaintance, and after that we will see about it. And now I suppose you want feeding."

Muttering peevishly to himself in response to Scoggery's eager nod, Conhoon pointed to the blackened

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pot containing the rest of his porridge. As Scoggery dug in, the wizard began packing for the journey. His feelings were mixed. Removing a curse seemed to him a betrayal of his calling, and Mirmul, to judge from his actions, was a simpleton who deserved no better than befell him. But at least Mirmul had been known to speak in praise of the wizards of Ireland; that was conduct to be encouraged, even in simpletons. And this man Fiacha needed a good lesson, playing dirty tricks with the help of foreign spirits. Perhaps the curse could be shifted. But that would involve working with another's curse — a djinnee's curse — and employing the services of a pooka, always a potentially unpleasant business. It was a muddle.

And there was the matter of payment, which had not been so much as mentioned. At the thought, Conhoon put down the bag into which he had been stuffing odd bits of food and rounded on Scoggery.

"What is my payment to be? Did the ollav set a price at all?" he demanded.

Caught with his mouth full of porridge, Scoggery looked up at the importunate wizard. He gulped, bulging-eyed, gasped, and said weakly, "He did not. That is up to Mirmul himself. But my master is a very generous man."

"Generosity is like the moon, boyo. It is very big at some times, and at other times it disappears entirely. Let us hear a hard figure."

Scoggery thought for a moment, then said, "He once gave a witch ten gold pieces for removing a murrain on his brindle cow."

"We are not talking cow, we are talking daughter, and her with a curse on her would make a devil weep. Ten gold pieces is no payment at all for removing such a curse."

"The brindle cow was his great favorite. But I think for the helping of his Blai he would give twenty."

Conhoon stood motionless, his expression stern; then he thrust a heel of bread into his bag and muttered, "Bad for the both of them if he does not give more."

They traveled all that day and the next and part of the day after, and finally, with the sun directly overhead but unseen for the clouds and drizzle, they came to the gloomy bog by the dark forest in the midst of which huddled the dense thicket that held the disreputable shanty where dwelt the pooka Murphy with his wife, his in-laws, an elderly aunt, and two creatures that were either his cousins or household pets of a startlingly ill-proportioned and menacing species. Pookas being the sort of things they are, it was possible the creatures were both.

Conhoon and Scoggery had had a silent journey. Scoggery was a sociable and chatty man, and these cheer-

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less surroundings urged him to speech of a phatic nature, but every time he opened his mouth to speak, Conhoon muzzled him with a glare, a gesture, or a shushing hiss. On this day he had not been able to get in a word since waking, and was fidgety with stored-up blather. When Conhoon crossed the bog on a narrow, treacherous causeway, dismounted, and tied up his complaisant horse to a whitened tree stump, Scoggery held his tongue, though his insides were jumping like a bag of kittens. But when Conhoon proceeded to extract from various pouches and pockets objects that suggested the imminent working of magic, Scoggery could be still no longer.

"Is it here the Pooka lives? Is he about?" he asked desperately.

"He is close enough," Conhoon replied.

Scoggery wet his lips. "What is a pooka like?"

"An affront to the eye, a shock to the ear, a horror to the nostrils; repellent of texture, disquieting in motion, grotesque in repose, at all times evil and malevolent: that is your pooka," the wizard recited as he arranged stones on the ground in a curious pattern.

"A terrible creature he is, surely," said Scoggery, drawing closer to Conhoon and peering nervously into the gloomy, dripping darkness of the forest.

"He is that. I would appreciate silence while I work a small spell for our mutual benefit. Move off a bit. I dislike crowds."

Scoggery obeyed at once, taking a few steps back, in the direction of the bog. Conhoon knelt, put a final stone in place, straightened, muttered under his breath, and made a gesture with his hand. Then he reached into his tunic and drew out a scrip.

"What are you doing now?" Scoggery asked.

"I am taking myself a bit of sustenance, and I recommend that you do the same. We may have a wait ahead of us."

"Is the pooka on his way?" Scoggery cried in alarm.

"He will come," said Conhoon, extracting a crust of bread and a piece of very hard cheese from the scrip and seating himself on a rock.

"Can you be so sure of him? If it's malevolent he is, he might not show up at all."

"The pooka Murphy owes me a favor, as the ollav well knows. He will repay. Pookas are malevolent, but they are not dishonest."

"What favor did you do the pooka?"

"No need for you to know. Sit you down and eat."

Scoggery took a seat on a fallen tree close by the wizard's rock. He sipped some water and nibbled half-heartedly on a piece of bread, but the prospect of finding himself face-to-face with a pooka had a dulling effect on his appetite. After a time he hitch-

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ed closer to Conhoon and asked in a lowered, cautious voice, "What will the pooka look like when he comes? Will he be an awful sight?"

"If it suits him, he might appear as something so horrible that you will drop dead at the sight of him," said Conhoon. Scoggery moaned and buried his face in his hands. Conhoon went on, "I cannot say for certain. Murphy often appears as a slightly overweight man of about sixty years of age, but a pooka can be a bird, or a baby, or a shaggy pony, or a patch of shadow, or a ripple in the water, or anything else he fancies."

"Does he make a great roaring when he comes, the way I'll know to hide my eyes?"

"He might do that. He might also decide to pop out of the air with no warning at all. There is no telling with a pooka."

This information was no comfort to Scoggery, who now realized that the pooka might be upon them at any time, or indeed already present, his arrival unknown and unheralded. Murphy might be the log he sat on, the mud under his feet, even the crust of bread he at once flung away. Inching nearer the wizard, casting quick apprehensive glances in all directions, Scoggery asked, "If he can be all those things, why is his name Murphy? I have known a hundred Murphys in my life, and every one a plain man like ourselves. I never thought of Murphy as a pooka name."

Conhoon chewed, spat out a bit of cheese rind, and said, "First of all, I am a wizard and not a plain man like yourself. Second, the name of Murphy is a matter of convenience that enables the pooka to transact business with those who are not of the pooka kind. If he spoke his true name aloud, everyone in earshot would be struck deaf, dumb, and mad on the spot."

"Do you tell me so?" Scoggery said in a squeezed whisper. He wished he were far away from here. He wished that Mirmul had never had a daughter, or begun a feud with Fiacha, or asked his ollav for advice, or chosen to send his loyal Ru of the Black Thumbnail, né Scoggery, on this grisly mission. He wished that all this were over. He wished it had never begun.

"My bold Conhoon," said a gravelly voice behind him, in a tone of genial welcome. Scoggery turned and saw a slightly overweight man of about sixty years standing on the soft, clinging mud at the edge of the bog. He did not sink in, but rested on the surface like a bubble of air. He was dressed in fine tweeds, his clothing well cut but in need of a good brushing. His manner was proprietary, his smile reassuring, but there was an unsettling odor in the air. Scoggery leapt to Conhoon's side.

"Is it the pooka Murphy come for a chat?" said the wizard, rising, like a man agreeably surprised by the appearance of an unexpected friend.

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"Himself," said the pooka, beaming. He took four steps forward. No footprints showed in the mud, nor was there an imprint of the blackthorn stick on which he had been leaning.

Scoggery edged behind Conhoon, trying to keep the wizard between the pooka and himself. He could not. Murphy observed him with mild interest. "And who is the stranger?" he asked.

"This one is the servant of Mirmul of the Long Face, him with the daughter turned into a rat," Conhoon replied.

Murphy moved the fingers of his left hand in an eccentric gesture, and Scoggery felt a tingling sensation about the back of his neck and the tips of his ears. A sudden crackling sound broke the silence, and the tingling ceased abruptly. Murphy wrung his hand and placed the fingertips in his mouth for a moment. "It is a strong spell you have protecting him and yourself," he said crossly.

"There is a bad lot in the woods and bogs these days. When I was a boy, a mother could walk from one end of Ireland to the other with a babe at her breast, and devil a thing to fear. But the people these days. . . ." Conhoon shook his head ruefully.

"True enough what you say, but could you not do an old acquaintance the courtesy of mentioning your spell?"

"Ah, do you know, I forgot it entirely," said the wizard, his expression a study in rueful concern.

Murphy gave an urbane shrug of his uneven shoulders. "That does happen with spells. Tell me now, are you on your way somewhere in particular? Was it myself you were seeking?"

"As a matter of fact, it's to the stronghold of Mirmul of the Long Face we're going. It's this business of the princess turned into a rat."

"And did you not summon me?"

"I did. Would I come this way and not stop to pass the time of day with the pooka Murphy?"

"Decent it is of you, Conhoon," said the pooka. He winked and smiled an approving smile. "Turned into a rat . . . now *there* is a respectable piece of work. Even a pooka would not be ashamed of *that*. Was it yourself did it, Conhoon?"

"It was not. The work of a djinnee it is, and him after popping out of a brass bottle and, without so much as 'Hello' or 'If you please,' turning a fine-looking woman into a greasy, slimy, flea-abundant rat."

"A djinnee," the pooka repeated in a low, ominous voice. His smile vanished. Filaments of dark smoke curled from under his hat.

"A terrible djinnee he was, too, mister," Scoggery cried, springing into full view, waving his warms excitedly, "with baggy pants like old sacks, and a ring in his ear, and an old rag wrapped around his head, and no shirt to his back, and him laughing all

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the time a dirty, nasty laugh."

"That is a djinnee for you," said Murphy judiciously. "And what is himself doing among decent people, will you tell me that? Who invited him here?"

Scoggery gave the account he had earlier given to Conhoon. Murphy heard him patiently. From time to time he drummed his fingers on the knob of the blackthorn stick, and now and again a wisp of smoke escaped from ear or nostril or under his hat, but he spoke not a word. His expression was no longer amicable; by the time Scoggery had finished his tale, the pooka's face was terrible to behold, and he was muttering a string of phrases under his breath whose import was unmistakable, though the language in which they were delivered was unknown to mortals, and mercifully so.

"Where is this djinnee?" asked Murphy softly when he was done with his execrations.

"Now, that is unknown to us. But I would think that yourself might —" Conhoon began.

"I will find him, and we will have deep and serious talk. And if he is not gone from this island before the day is out, I will commence to kick him," said the pooka Murphy in a steely voice, "and I will kick him from the place of our conversation to the Valley of the Deaf, and three bones will I break with every kick, and him landing on a rock and breaking three more every time he comes down, except when he falls on a beehive or a hornets' nest, or lights in a treetop among fierce pecking birds. And when I have lambasted him from end to end of that dark valley, I will proceed to kick him westward to Cruachu, and my last kick will send him into the cave wherein dwell the Grievous Company, Airitech and her children and the great-jawed, hump-backed, fiery-clawed followers of them."

"And the magic pigs. Do not overlook the magic pigs," said Conhoon darkly.

Murphy gave a little start, as if at an unpleasant memory. "I will set the magic pigs on him," he said after a tense silence. "And we will wait a long time before another djinnee shows his face in Ireland."

Upon uttering the last word, the pooka turned and darted at great speed directly across the bog, making neither stir nor ripple in the dark waters. He strode headlong into a thicket on the far shore, and the cracking and snapping of his swift passage was clearly audible to the two men.

"Will he find the djinnee, do you think?" Scoggery asked in a cautious whisper as the sounds of Murphy's progress diminished with distance.

"He will be onto him in no time at all. Your pooka is a great one for finding what he looks for."

"I would not want to be that djinnee."

"Your pooka is also a great one for

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the talk," Conhoon assured him. "There will be no kicking. Djinn have no appreciation for rain and mist and bogs, and this one is desperate surely to get back to his sand and hot sun. They will have a good talk, and in the end the djinnee will go home where he belongs, and it would not surprise me a bit if the pooka lends a hand with the necessary magic to get him there."

"Is it friends they are, then, pookas and djinn? It did not sound that way to me," Scoggery said.

"It's all in the way of business," said Conhoon with a knowing nod. "Your pookas and your djinn work in much the same line. It is not an exaggeration to say that a pooka is an Irish djinnee, and a djinnee is an Arabian pooka. Now, as long as your djinnee is off in his desert and your pooka is safe in his bog, devil a bit of rivalry is there between them. But if one of them goes to the other's native soil and begins doing inconvenient magic on the neighbors, there is trouble in store. And you must bear in mind, Scoggery, that ours is a small country, and generously furnished with fairies, and little people of several kinds, and pookas, and all manner of spiritual creatures known by name but mysterious in nature, as well as practitioners like myself. It is a crowded profession in these parts, the working of magic is, and newcomers are not welcome. There's little enough custom to go around among our own."

Scoggery mulled over Conhoon's words, and said at last, "I see your point, wizard, and subtly did you manage it all. But what good does it do poor Blai? How can the djinnee change her back once he's left the country?"

"It's I will change her back. But it's easier to unspell a spell and make the unspelling stick if the speller is not on hand to undo your unspelling, if you take my meaning. And there are other good reasons for getting rid of the djinnee, which I will keep to myself."

"Then you'll be after taking the spell from the dark-eyed Blai!"

"Haven't I said so?" Conhoon snapped impatiently. "Mount up, boyo, and lead us to the unfortunate rat."

In a long and eventful career, Conhoon had met with many a man and woman who sported epithets wildly inappropriate to their appearance, accomplishments, or personal qualities. Rory the Tall was no more than average in height; Marivonn of the Nine Dun Cows would not have known a cow if she found one under her bed, though she was a great hand with the pigs; Olwen Honey-Voice sang like a rusty hinge. But Mirmul of the Long Face made up for them all. His name was his identity. He was gloom wrapped in a dry, pinched skin.

"Decent it is of you to come this long, weary way to deliver the sad

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news itself, wizard," he intoned when Conhoon was presented to him.

"Are you so sure it's bad news I bring, Your Majesty?"

"Aren't you here with only my man Ru of the Black Thumbnail, and no pooka to be seen? Without the pooka Murphy, how is my poor Blai to be freed from the awful spell she's under?" Mirmul wailed, and heaved a deep sigh.

"It's with Scoggery I am, and glad you should be that I bring no pooka under this roof."

"I have never been glad for anything in my life, wizard, and why should I be glad now at the absence of a pooka?"

"Your pooka takes a great delight in mischief of an inconvenient and often painful nature, Your Majesty. Get one in here, and he might turn the lot of you into fleas, and consider it a pleasant day's work," Conhoon explained.

"It would not matter to me. Sad is the fall of night, sad the short and gloomy days of winter, sad the sound of rain dripping on the bedclothes, saddest of all the sight of my daughter turned into a rat," Mirmul said mournfully.

"Then it's time she was turned back again," Conhoon announced, folding his arms and looking coolly about the dim and gloomy state chamber.

"And how will that be, with no pooka to help at all?"

"It will be done, and soon enough. But first you must know that I expect to be rewarded."

Mirmul sighed and raised his eyes resignedly to the heavens. "A sad world it is when a wizard will do no good except for the reward in it. I will give you ten gold pieces."

Glowering, Conhoon said, "It is a hard, exhausting bit of magic I'll be having to work for the young lady's sake. You will give me four-and-twenty gold pieces, or you will have a daughter eating cheese and living in the walls for the rest of her life."

"A hard man you are, wizard. Didn't I have the murrain lifted from my brindle cow for only five, and her the finest cow in Ireland?"

"It's ten you paid, and for ten gold pieces you can have your daughter turned into a cow, for all I care. If you want a young lady, the price is four-and-twenty."

"I will not dicker like a tinker. Painful is a splinter in the ball of the thumb, painful a thorn in the great toe, painful a hornet flown up the nose, most painful of all a daughter turned into a rat, or even a cow. You will have your four-and-twenty gold pieces. Bring in my daughter."

Attendants dashed from the room, Scoggery among them. Conhoon waited, impassive. From without came sounds suggestive of strenuous physical effort, the clank of metal, the squeak of heavy-laden wheels, shouts of warning and alarm, and the resent-

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ful chittering of a rat. The doors of the state chamber swung wide, and in came four men hauling a low, wheeled platform, brightly painted, on which stood an iron cage trimmed in silver. Inside was a very large, ugly rat.

"Does she live in this cage?" Conhoon asked.

"Isn't it necessary, for the safety? A hunting pack I have, and them the finest hounds in all Ireland, and didn't she do for three of them before I could get her in the cage?" Mirmul covered his face with his hands, threw back his head, and moaned, "Gloomy is the sound of the wind wuthering in the mouths of sea-caves, gloomy the howling —"

"Tell us afterwards," Conhoon broke in impatiently, rolling back his sleeves and stooping for a closer look at Blai. He jumped back barely in time to save his nose from being bitten off.

"It is a mean rat your daughter has been turned into. Or did she behave in this way before the change?" he asked.

"She did not. Sweet the honey from the comb; sweet the cooing of the ring-dove; sweet the clover-breath of my brindle cow; sweeter than all these the temper of Blai the dark-eyed, the coppery-haired; Blai of the tapered fingers and small white feet; her with the voice of a silver bell and the grace of a trout, praised by bards, adored by heroes, envied by all women, honored by all men for the goodness and kindness and gentleness of her. . . ," Mirmul began.

Conhoon examined the rat as Mirmul spoke. The closer he looked, the clearer it was to him that the job ahead would require huge amounts of magic and leave him weak and exhausted for a month afterward. Mirmul droned on. Conhoon looked around, and saw everywhere quick sidelong glances of collusion and facial twitches of discomfort and distaste. The sweetness of Blai, it appeared, was impressed less emphatically on the attendants and followers of Mirmul than on the king himself.

". . . Generous as summer, beautiful as autumn, still as winter, welcome as spring is my fair Blai, and I am beginning to think that you will be no help to her at all, wizard, with the job not even begun yet and the price I'm paying you," Mirmul concluded.

"A good wizard does not rush —" Conhoon began in reply, but was silenced by the sudden appearance, with the soft pop of a bursting bubble, of two figures. One was a slightly overweight man of about sixty years, leaning on a blackthorn stick and smiling in an amicable manner to all in the chamber. The other was much taller, a man of impressive bulk, barechested, with swarthy, glistening skin, his smooth and rounded face as hairless as glass except for the dark brows that curled upward at the corners. A

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blood-red turban made him seem even taller. His generous arms were folded across his chest, resting on the upper reaches of his great bulging belly. Baggy trousers, gaudily striped, tapered to a point below which was thin air. He had no feet.

"The pooka!" said Conhoon, as simultaneously Mirmul gasped, "The djinnee!"

"A good day to all here," said the pooka Murphy with a tip of the hat and a jaunty flourish of the blackthorn stick. The djinnee, with deep, booming voice, said something in a language composed equally of guttural and smoothly liquid syllables, and completely unintelligible to all his listeners.

"Will you tell that one to speak in the language of civilized men?" snapped Mirmul, backing to the safer company of his guards and retainers.

"I have just done so," boomed the djinnee, "and no one here could understand. For your convenience, lowly ones, I will speak in the barking of dogs that is the tongue of this gray and dismal land."

"Fine talk, that, for a creature with no feet at all," said Conhoon blandly, looking off into the distance.

"Ah, my hard Conhoon, that is a delicate subject to raise with the uncle," said Murphy in a low, confidential voice, drawing Conhoon aside for private conversation.

"Your uncle, is he? And how does he like being kicked from one end of Ireland to the other by his nephew?"

Murphy smiled warmly. "Ah, now, there was no kicking in it. Didn't my heart go out to the poor creature, him halfway around the world and far from home, and not a soul to speak a kind word to him? I brought him to my hovel for a bit of refreshment before his long journey. He saw my auntie, and was smitten with love at the sight of her. A beautiful moment it was, Conhoon, and you would have wept like a baby to see them. Best of all, he is taking her back to Araby with him, and taking my cousins as well, to help with the housekeeping."

"A fortunate day for you, Murphy."

The pooka's expression clouded over. "Maybe. He will not leave without his feet."

Conhoon nodded sympathetically. "They are handy things, the feet. Where did he leave them?"

Murphy looked around to be certain no one could overhear them — though the agitated babble of the guards, servants, and retainers made eavesdropping unlikely — and in a lowered voice said, "In the brass bottle. Mirmul stuck the stopper back before the uncle got all of himself out."

"What do they want, wizard? What are they up to?" Mirmul called to him nervously.

"I am finding that out," Conhoon replied. Pointing to the djinnee, he said, "Is a big fellow the like of him unable to speak up and ask for his own feet?"

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Closing his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose, Murphy said uncomfortably, "Well, now it is a great embarrassment to a djinnee, being caught short like that. And there are certain rules of behavior among his people that you and I would not bother our heads with, only to him they are a matter of some importance."

Conhoon felt a great satisfaction. The suspicions he had entertained upon Murphy's appearance with the djinnee had been strengthened by their subsequent polite behavior, and now confirmed into certainty by Murphy's evasive words. The task before Conhoon had suddenly been made much easier, and his reward enlarged. With an innocent smile, he said, "Would you be telling me that your uncle lost all claim on his bottle and whatever of himself is in it by running off and leaving it behind? Is that the way of it?"

"Something like that," said Murphy. "And please keep your voice down."

"And would you be looking for a third party to get the bottle back so you can be rid of your uncle and your auntie and the rest of them?"

"It would be the easiest way for all concerned," said Murphy, attempting a smile.

"That would make two great favors you owe me, Murphy," said Conhoon, his voice cold and hard as iron.

"Two? Didn't I bring the djinnee here, and him willing to take away the spell and fill your pockets with gold if you'll only get him his feet?"

"I was about to take the spell off by myself and get my gold from Mirmul, and his would not be the kind to turn to sand in my pocket. No, it's two favors you owe me if I do this for you."

"You're a thief, Conhoon," Murphy whispered hatefully.

"And you're a poor thwarted creature who'll be stuck with his auntie and the cousins for the rest of his days if I don't get the brass bottle for you. Two."

Murphy sighed. He frowned. He nodded. "Two it is."

"Get him out of here!" Mirmul shouted from behind a rank of guards. "It's harm enough he's done, the sway-bellied, rag-headed, footless devil!"

"Dog of an unenlightened barbarian! Know that I was conveyed by stealth and treachery to this place of gloom!" roared the djinnee.

"Then steal your way back home," cried a grizzled old warrior, shaking his fist.

"Shush your uncle, Murphy, before we have more trouble than is good for us. I'll talk to Mirmul," said Conhoon.

The state chamber was in something of an uproar by this time. Mirmul, red-faced, had replaced his customary melancholy with anger. His ollav was mumbling and making wild

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gestures. The djinnee was splitting the air with denunciations both general and specific, directing his maledictions to selected individuals by pointing with a fat, long-nailed finger as he articulated his curses. All the guards and warriors were clutching spears and sword hilts and making battle boasts, while the servants hurried to and fro, babbling excitedly, bumping into one another and into articles of furniture, dropping goblets, weeping for fright and confusion. Conhoon pushed his way through the milling mass to Mirmul's side. The king glared at him.

"Is this your work, wizard? The djinnee back here, insulting me and my loyal followers, and my daughter a rat still?" he cried.

"All is going smoothly, Your Majesty, and I will thank you not to criticize my methods unless you have better ones of your own." Several of Mirmul's elder counselors grumbled at these words. The wizard glared them into silence and went on, "Get your men and yourself out of the chamber, and leave the rest to me."

From the center of the room, a deep voice bellowed, "Benighted, hairy-faced, foul-smelling children of uncleanness, know that for these insults. . . ," followed by a series of hushing sounds and, "There, now, take it easy, Uncle, and don't be upsetting yourself over the likes of them," on the part of Murphy.

"Would you have me abandon my state chamber, my throne, and my daughter to that pair?" said Mirmul, pained and irate.

"I would. And I would have the brass bottle in my hand before you leave."

"It's in my daughter's cage, and welcome you are to it." Mirmul turned to his men. "Clear the room of all our people. We'll leave himself here with the djinnee and his friend, and my poor unfortunate Blai."

The room emptied quickly, the only delay caused by the last few warriors, who lingered in the doorway to brandish weapons while they completed colorful descriptions of the vengeance they were prepared to take and exchanged final insults with the djinnee. When they were gone, and the doors barred behind them, Conhoon turned to djinnee and pooka and said briskly, "Let's get on with it."

"The bottle! We need the bottle — where's the bottle?" Murphy demanded in sudden alarm.

"It's in the cage," said Conhoon, pointing.

"Ah. Well, get it, then."

"Get it yourself. Didn't that creature in the cage near take the face off me when I stooped to get a good look at her?"

With a dazzling smile, the djinnee said proudly, "It is a most excellent spell I have placed upon her, is it not, friend of my nephew? This is no princess pining in the skin of a rat, I will

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have you know. It is a rat completely and entirely; it thinks like a rat and behaves like a rat. Oh, this is a total rat."

"Then *you* can get the bottle," said Murphy.

"I am not fond of rat-bite, to put my hand in the cage of that unfriendly creature. Use your stick," said the djinnee.

"That thing would bite it in two."

"Show a little respect for your uncle, Murphy. Use your stick," Conhoon said impatiently.

"I will not. It is a fine stick."

"Then go up to the other end of the cage and tease her; the way I'll snatch the bottle while she's occupied with you."

This was the plan followed, rather clumsily, with Murphy and his uncle practically falling over one another at every angry lunge of the rat. Eventually the stratagem succeeded, and Conhoon hefted the brass bottle in his hands.

"Give me the bottle," said the djinnee, reaching out with long-nailed fingers.

Conhoon pulled it away. "Wait a minute, now. We have some details to work out."

"I want my feet!"

"You'll have them, boyo, but I will have all the fine points settled between us before you put them on. Murphy, do you agree that you owe me an additional favor for this day's work?"

Grudgingly, the pooka assented. Conhoon turned to the djinnee, who was fidgeting. "And you — do you agree to fair payment for my services in the matter of your feet?"

"Absolutely! Friend of my nephew, I will give you gold, much gold, all the gold you can carry in both hands. And rubies, too, the size of pigeons' eggs. And pearls as big as melons."

"I know your tricks, and I will have none of them. This rat spell, now . . . a good one, you tell me?"

Nodding his head so vigorously that his turban slipped over one eye, the djinnee said. "It is the very finest, I assure you. I learned it from Sakhr al-Djinnee, Father of Fiends, just before his lamentable encounter with Solomon, son of David, which resulted in his confinement in a vessel similar to the one in your hand. He was less fortunate than I. He is at the bottom of Lake Tiberias, sunk deep in the mud, forgotten by all but a faithful few. A powerful and clever fiend was Sakhr al-Djinnee, and his spells are the envy of all." Concluding, he straightened his turban.

"A shame would it be to allow a fine piece of work like that to fly off into the empty air. I will have the spell for payment. Take it off this poor lady, put it in the bottle — once you have your feet out — and set it to light on the first one who pulls out the stopper. Keep your gold and your rubies and your melons. The spell is what I want," said Conhoon.

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The rat hurled itself against the bars, chittering in a fury. All three moved smartly away.

"It's nimble you are, surely, for a man with no feet," Conhoon remarked to the djinnee, adding, "if I may say so without giving offense."

"I have learned to manage, and I accept the complimentary intent of your observation, friend of my nephew. But I believe that a person intending to marry and settle down should be possessed of feet," said the djinnee.

With a sharp tap of his stick on the floor, Murphy said, "I think we are all agreed on that, and indeed on all matters of substance. Can we get down to business?"

The rest was simple. Standing the brass bottle upright on the floor, the djinnee positioned himself above it. At his signal, Conhoon pulled out the stopper, and a rolling plume of creamy white vapor steamed upward to attach itself to the djinnee's legs, nicely completing them with a pair of small feet encased in bright yellow slippers with upturned toes. The djinnee took a few exploratory steps, hopped up and down, and cut a caper. Beaming happily, he bowed to Conhoon and held out his hand for the empty bottle.

"Excellent. Most excellent," he said. "And now I will insert the spell."

He extended both hands, one clutching the bottle, its open end foremost, the other pointing at the rat, which retreated to the farthest corner of its cage. A few soft phrases in an unknown tongue, and an attractive, if rather bedraggled, young lady stared at them from the cage while an inky-black thread of smoke poured silently into the brass bottle. When the last wisp was swallowed, the djinnee thrust the stopper home and tapped it securely into place with the heel of his hand. With a flourish, he presented it to the wizard.

"It is yours, friend of my nephew. He who opens this becomes a rat forthwith," he said.

"Well, I thank you. That was very nicely done," Conhoon replied graciously. "It is always a pleasure to see —"

Djinnee and pooka vanished with no more sound than a feather falling on snow. Conhoon was alone in the state chamber with the brass bottle, the cage, and Blai. Blai struggled to her knees, bumped her head on the roof of the cage, and cried out angrily.

"How do you feel, miss?" Conhoon asked.

"It's filthy I feel, and as itchy as an old dog. What am I doing in here? What's been going on?" she demanded angrily.

"It is a long and complicated story. Your father will tell it to you."

"Who are you? And where's my da? Get me out of this cage!" she howled, her voice rising at each utterance to become a shriek on the last.

Conhoon wished no further discourse with Blai. He rushed to the doors and flung them wide to admit

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Mirmul and his men. Their cries of wonderment were sweet to his ears.

When the crying and kissing and hugging were done with, and the cage dragged out, and Blai gone off for a good long soak and a change of clothing, and the guards, retainers, and servants of Mirmul's household returned to their various posts and duties, and the ollav seated muttering at the foot of the throne on one side, and Scoggery standing proudly at the other, Conhoon approached the king. "Well now, Your Majesty, it's all over bar the payment. Your daughter is a lady once again, and the djinnee will trouble you no more. It is a time for cheer," he said.

"True it is that I have my Blai again, but now I fear that I will have her all my life," said Mirmul with a sigh. "What man would be marrying a woman who was once a rat, I ask you? Sad it is, the thought of her future."

"Blai is a fine lump of a girl, Your Majesty, and a man with such a daughter, and a reputation for prompt and willing payment of honorable debts, will have no trouble finding a decent husband for her."

Mirmul grunted. "Twenty gold pieces, was it?"

"Four-and-twenty, it was."

Mirmul signaled to an aged counselor, who nodded and shuffled from the chamber. "You will have your gold, wizard," he said.

"And praise of your generosity will be on my lips wherever I go, Your Majesty," said the wizard.

Mirmul grunted again, gloomily and pensively. After a time he said, "Good it is to have my daughter back, and good to be rid of the djinnee, and good to have the praise of a wizard; best of all would be to get my own back on Fiacha the Far-Traveled."

"That would make sweet your repose, indeed," said Conhoon.

"It would be no more than plain justice. A man who would turn a neighbor's daughter into a rat . . . I ask you, now, what is a father to do under such circumstances?"

"A terrible provocation it is, indeed. When I was a boy, such tricks were unheard of. If two men had a quarrel, they went at it sensibly, bashing away at each other until one of them could not stand on his feet, and that was the end of it. No djinn at all. But the people these days. . . ." Conhoon shook his head and pursed his lips in disapproval.

After another interval of silence, Mirmul said, "In a kennel at the far end of the wood, I keep the great wolf of Glen mBolcàin, him that gobbled down like hares the three brothers of Fiacha. Every third day do I feed him scraps of meat from my own table, and address him with fond and honeyed speech, and this is gall to the heart of Fiacha and sweetness to me. But I would do more."

"I am sure of it," said Conhoon.

Mirmul lapsed once more into his musings, and after a long pause said,

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"In a pool hidden from view, I keep the great pike of the Moy, him that ate the favorite hound of Fiacha. On days when I do not visit the wolf, I go to the pool and cast bits of bread on the water to delight the pike, and when he surfaces to dine, I address him by fond names. This, too, is a stench in the nostrils of Fiacha and a perfume to me. But I would do more."

Before Conhoon could make polite response, the elder returned bearing a small leather pouch, which he handed to Scoggery, who handed it to Mirmul. The king emptied it into his lap. He counted out twenty-four gold pieces and placed them in the pouch, which he then handed to Scoggery, who handed it to the wizard. A considerable number of gold pieces remained in Mirmul's lap.

"My thanks, Your Majesty, and my good wishes to you and your fair daughter," said Conhoon, stowing the pouch safely.

"Your work is done, wizard, and you have my leave to go," Mirmul said. He shifted position on the throne, and the gold pieces in his lap clinked softly and pleasantly. Leaning his chin on one hand, he gazed on the floor and sighed deeply.

Conhoon took three steps back, stopped, and then, instead of departing, he retraced his steps and stopped before the throne. In a soft voice he said, "Disheartening it is to know a king unhappy, disheartening to see a lady in a cage, disheartening the thought of a sly trick unrequited, most disheartening of all to have a fine spell bottled up idle when there's a generous and decent man could make good use of it." He drew out the brass bottle and held it up before him. "But before we get down to the details, Your Majesty, I'm wondering how much gold you've got in your lap."

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George Alec Effinger's latest was written as a loving satire on the optimistic post-holocaust story. "I'm doubting the efficacy of the wise old man who is single-handedly attempting to save the best of our culture. He tells the children that it's their responsibility to pass it on. I think the kids will have a different idea of what to pass on. . ."

Skylab Done It

BY
GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

I stayed by Ol' Mose a long time until it finally sunk in it be my ma ended the world. I be lying in my box remembering how my pa built his bomb shelter. My ma still be alive then, and she yelled at Pa for every dumb move he made. I closed my eyes and saw Pa standing next the house with the shovel in his hand; with my eyes closed, Pa always be young and tall with a lot of curly black hair coming out the cap he kept right on the very back of his head. With my eyes closed, Ma be where she supposed to be, too. She be standing up next to him holding her ice tea, telling Pa he a damn fool.

Pa got this little look he use on Ma. It the little look I see old folks use it means "Shut up, bitch." Sometimes Ma'd see the look and she shut up, her mouth squeezed tight like she wanted to smush Pa into wormy slime with her lips; then sometimes she'd just yell, "Don't give *me* that look," and Pa'd let out a deep breath and pass a glance over by me and we'd know he'd won. Thing is, Ma won most of the time, come to think on it. Still, God in His wisdom took her and not Pa. Old folks understand God and these things, they done thought about God all they lives and done made a kind of handy list of sayings to help everybody else understand. Some old folks call these sayings commandments, some call them laws, some got a million other weird ideas. They's all kinds of crazy old folks, is why. The A-Number-One thing my pa always said, even when God took Ma, was, "Just goes to show." I remember that all my life.

Pa started building his bomb shelter the day he hear Skylab be crashing. *Really* got him mad. "I make it

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through Korea, I watch Viet Nam every night on TV for ten years, and now my own country gone drop a twenty-ton whatyacall on my head from outer space." He got up and moved around the living room. Ma be sitting in her chair waiting for the news to get over, reading *TV Guide* and smoking. I be lying in front of the TV like usual. My pa he don't sit down again, though. After a little while, my ma looks up at him, sort of. The way old folks do, you know, without moving they heads none. Just roll they eyeballs up under they brows and crinkling they foreheads a little. Showed what got into Pa, it ain't nothing to bother no normal sane person.

That must made Pa madder, that be Ma's whole idea. Pa he goes on talking loud and waving his arms. I don't remember a single word of what Pa said then. I remember Ma be saying, "Hell, they's no more chance it whomping down here than anyplace else in the world. You go outside and get struck by lightning, more like."

Pa guessed he had her then. "Lightning! Lightning, you stupid bitch! They's a flash and a flicker and she's done with. This Skylab thing, you be whupped with a top-secret lead safe and the rest of that broke-up junk come down a hunnerd mile an hour or so, they ain't so much of you left to slide into a envelope."

"Want to worry about it, fine; go ahead. Leave me alone."

Pa give her one of them looks. "Shut up, bitch," I think, but Ma be looking at the TV. She don't be watching it, she just be keeping her eyes off of Pa. She don't be giving him the satisfaction. They argued about satisfaction for years. Then God stepped in.

But it all started with Pa's bomb shelter. He be fixing to build a bomb shelter for two reasons: one, he want a shelter to put his bomb; and two, he figured if they be someplace safe in case Skylab hit our house, he could stop worrying.

My ma's sharp old mind fetched up on Pa's fuckup pretty quick. "Listen, dummy," she say, "you think a thing like Skylab come screaming out the sky be making a nice neat hole in the ground for you? You never skip stones on the water? Say you bust your ass and build your bomb shelter. Then Skylab it come down and flatten our house, then skip and flatten your goddamn bomb shelter too. Huh? How about *that*?"

"Yeah you right," he say, and he spit, so I know he don't give two hoots in a holler *what* she say.

Got *me* to thinking, anyways. "Hey Ma, how come we got no flat stones around here?" We don't. I ain't never skip no stone in my life, but I will when I be old folks myself and I go see what's left of the world, the streets paved with gold and flat stones. "Hey Ma."

My ma don't be listening to me, she be putting all her weight into this

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curly sneer she done so well. I said, "Hey Ma, how come, Ma?"

"The hell you talking about?"

"How come we got no flat stones?"

It took Ma a second to gear down from whupping Pa and get around to me. Ma be fair that way, you got to hand her that; she didn't take no advantage of me just on account of I be little and dumb and just like my pa. She'd tear my ass up every chance, but always she played me right. I mean, Ma'd hold back a little, not give me the worst of her temper like she done Pa, say, or her own ma.

She squinted her eyes some, like I be too tiny for her to notice. Ma said, "Ain't got no flat stones. We right on the goddamn edge of the Gulf of Mexico. Ain't got no stones. Got shells."

"I *know*." I knowed we got shells. Been knowing that for years. I just wanted to find out how come shells can't live together down here with skip stones, but I be too young to make my ma hear what I say.

"And stop your whining," she goes. That ain't really one of them important old folks sayings, but still it got said a lot. It be on this sort of extra list, same as "*I'll* give you something to cry about" and "Don't *you* look away from me." Old folks say them things, but kids can't. Got something to do with God and His ultimate plan or something. I guess I learn about all that when I be old folks. Unless I be sick that day.

Meanwhile my pa go next the house with the old shovel. He keep looking up at the sky like any second now Skylab gone come booming down and they ain't one damn bit of difference if Pa moves over a couple feet to his right on account of Skylab might hit *there* or if he moves a couple feet to his left on account of Skylab might hit *there* or if he goes back in the house or down to the bait shop or passes by the Sea-Ray or drives way the hell and gone up the parish road to Bar's Mike & Grill. He just ain't safe nowheres. I think he never be like that before, not in Korea or watching Viet Nam neither. And I think he blamed it on Ma somehow, all her fault he couldn't never be safe no more. Not until he built his bomb shelter.

My ma come outside and watched him in the yard. She got a glass of ice tea. They ain't much ice tea no more. She says, "What you gone do? Dig?"

Pa says, "What's it look like?" I mean, he holding a shovel and all.

"Yeah you right. Know what you gone hit?" She had that smirk on her; you know, she sure she got him in another minute and ain't nothing he can do and he too dumb even to see it coming.

"Tell me," he said. Now, to me, my ma sounded dumb on account of Pa gone hit dirt, it be sitting there right under the tip of the shovel. Bet my pa be thinking the same thing. Just goes to show.

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"Gone hit water pretty damn fast." That sneer again. Twice in half an hour. They ain't gone be no satisfaction tonight, I could give odds on it.

Well, my pa he looked at me and I looked at him. He set both his hands on the handle of the shovel and he frowned. He fool with the dirt some but nothing serious, no real hole or nothing. Our house it built up on stilts higher'n my head on account of we be spitting distance from the Gulf and every time they's a hurricane even fifty miles from here you got to go out to the john in the pirogue. Pa looked beat, he truly did. I remember him telling me about Korea when he be scared to death or tired as all hell or bored silly, but he never give up. A minute there I thought my pa gone give up, then he looked at Ma and her sneer. That done it. "You think you so smart," he say in a quiet voice.

My ma she don't say nothing. She just drank some ice tea.

Pa say, "Come on, boy, you gone help me."

That shook me up some. I didn't never help much on account of Pa always said I fucked everything up, and that probably be true on account of everything always *be* fucked up and I ain't got no brothers nor sisters only a dog once. "What we gone do, Pa?"

He give me a tough look like I seen on TV sometimes. "We gone build us a bomb shelter, and not your ma nor no Skylab,gone stop us!"

I took a deep breath. They was something goddamn neat how my pa said it. All of a sudden these thing I hear about how God made us and the ivy twining and all like that, it all made sense. Then it gone away again.

What Pa figured, see, if we all got to build our houses up on stilts on account of St. Didier Parish be so low, they ain't no reason we can't build our bomb shelter just the same. Which is what we done did. Me and Pa and Little Gus Hebert — Little Gus and Ma and nearly everybody else died when the bomb went off — we went out and piled up the back of Pa's pickup truck with wood and stuff. Took me and Pa and Little Gus Hebert the best part of two weeks building that bomb shelter, but when we be done Pa be proud, you could tell. The bomb shelter looked small, but Pa say don't need to be no bigger on account of he could truck the bomb around in the pickup in the first place. So he and Little Gus they carried the bomb up into the shelter and Pa parked the truck underneath between the stilts. Pa put one hand on my shoulder and he said, "You done a good job, boy. I don't never want you up there messing with my bomb." I said I wouldn't, and I didn't much.

We go into the house and Ma be watching TV and smoking and drinking ice tea and reading next week's *TV Guide*. They ain't no cable TV in St. Didier Parish, and Ma liked read-

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ing *TV Guide* to find all kinds of stuff we be missing, what the folks in New Orleans be getting, all these neat movies and the Chicago Cubs and the Playboy Channel. My pa just sat there with his mouth shut like he don't give a damn, and Ma gone on about how if he could actually *do* something we might live in New Orleans or Lake Charles or somewheres exciting, but no, here we be in this flyspeck town of Arbier and we watching the same episode of "The Jeffersons" we seen last September the 14th, and again a year ago July the 22nd. She kept track. She said, "We watching 'The Jeffersons,' for God's sake."

I open my eyes wide. See, up to then I don't know it be for God's sake we be watching "The Jeffersons."

It turned out Skylab didn't hit us after all. My ma be all smirky about it, but Pa he said, "Better safe'n sorry." No matter how sniffy Ma got they be some kind of truth in there. Actually Skylab didn't hit nowheres nor nobody.

I got a whole different story I mean to tell, though. The other stuff be just showing what gone on before I guess it be my ma ended the world like we knowed it.

I be younger then and didn't understand whatall I be knowing today, so what I know about the end of the world is blurry-like and part mine and part what I hear from other folks. Me and Pa gone up by Linhart which be about thirty mile from Arbier when Arbier still be there. We be getting out the house. Ma'd say, "Get the hell out the house," sometimes, and we climbed in the pickup truck and gone somewheres. I be with Pa, we'd pass by Linhart and see a movie. It be just Pa, I don't know where he gone.

We drove back on the new highway and got just across the bayou. We stopped off for a snowball. Snowball stand belonged to this old black guy name of Mose. Pa and everybody called him Ol' Mose. He be older'n anybody and black. I still remember the snowball I got: I got half cherry and half camaro. Camaro a flaver Ol' Mose invented all by hisself. I can't tell you what it be like except it blue.

Pa and me be working on our snowballs when they be this awful noise like, well, I don't know but it just gone on and on. They be a flash and a roar and I though my pa done chunked me upside the head, but then I knowed he didn't on account of he be sprawled all over the ground and his snowball be splashed all over the parking lot. "Uh-oh," he said.

"Lawd," said Ol' Mose.

LIghtning, I thought. I forgot all about Skylab on account of that be a long time before and I didn't even remember it. This be years later.

"The refinery," said Pa, he getting up and dusting his pants off.

Ol' Mose stuck his scrawny old neck out the window of his snowball stand and he stared south at the sky. "Looks nucular in origin to me."

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My pa looked at him and Ol' Mose looked back. Don't nobody be looking at me. I be looking at the mushroom cloud.

Then my pa got all mad and snatched me hard by the wrist and kind of drug me to the pickup truck. More like out of habit, Ol' Mose say, 'Y'all come back now, y'hear?"

Pa be muttering real hard to hisself and he say, "I *told* her not to mess with it. I *told* her." The whole time he started up the truck and pulled back onto the highway and drove on down towards Arbier. Before we even come to where the old parish road joined up, before the motel even, they be water. I mean, *water*. This don't be no flood. This water never gone run off nor dry up nor nothing. The Gulf of Mexico done made up its mind and come rolling up to meet us. The bomb dug out this great big hole and the Gulf done filled it up. Ain't nothing to see, just water all the way to who knows where. No more highway, no houses, nothing. Damn stilts done a hell of a lot of good.

Me and Pa watched the brown water churn around for a good long time. Other folks come and stood by us and looked for a while and didn't say nothing and then gone away. Ain't a lot to do staring at water, it come right down to it. So by and by Pa lets out a deep breath and he says, "Well, I hope she finally satisfied, on account of that be all the satisfaction *she* ever gone get." He walked back to the pickup truck slow and he even opened the door for me to let me climb in. He gone around and got in and started the truck and backed up a ways and headed up the highway the way we come. Stopped at the snowball stand again. Ol' Mose be standing in his parking lot, his skinny little arms folded across his chest, his old black face in this sad look and his head be nodding up and down like he knowed it all the time.

My pa left the truck running but he got out and come around and opened my door. I got out. He grabbed my wrist again and we go up to the old man.

Ol' Mose looked over my head towards where Arbier done use to be. "That it?"

"Yeah," said Pa.

Ol' Mose just nodded.

"You keep the kid?" asked my pa.

"All right," said Ol' Mose.

Pa got back in the truck and drove away towards Linhart. Then I be staying by Ol' Mose, and he done told me about the world and how things use to be and how they gone be now. Ol' Mose told me I got to keep things alive. See, when Pa's bomb gone off, everybody else's bombs gone off right after. Ol' Mose said they be one hell of a lot of bombs all over the place, more'n Pa or anybody knowed, not just in St. Didier Parish but all over Louisiana and the whole country and even other countries. Somebody done

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got the wrong idea who blow up what bomb. They asked me, I tell them it probably be my ma, but they ain't no time. Boom. Then just like that — Boom Boom Boom. New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Thibodaux.

Ol' Mose say where in hell Pa got this bomb the first place. A thing to ask a kid, where bombs come from. Folks make them, that's where. Well, my pa built the bomb shelter but he really ain't much good building nothing else. Pa and Little Gus Hebert built the bomb shelter. Pa and Little Gus worked construction on the Stiles Creek nucular plant. They done put up Stiles Creek, lot of St. Didier Parish guys did. Ol' Mose he figured they be making that bomb like a joke or something when they finish up Stiles Creek. The plant be for putting out electricity, which it never actually done. Little Gus Hebert come home with the bomb but his wife, this big fat woman with sometimes blond hair, she don't let him keep it so he give it to my pa and my ma made him build the shelter for it.

"Be just fine," Pa said.

"A goddamn bomb in the house!" my ma yelled. She be really mad and screaming this time. No little sneers or nothing: *mad* mad.

"It ain't got no fuse or nothing." Pa talked like they be nothing he be scared of, but come to find out he don't know a fuse from a field pea. I ain't scared on account of I believed my pa. Then it *done* blowed up, so Ma be partly right.

"Get out the house," she said. Be when pa gone out and got the shovel. I done told about that.

Now I gone tell what Ol' Mose done for me besides giving me a place to sleep and all. He showed me how old folks act, how I gone stop being a kid. He said I gone take a place in the world, be a hero, save the little bitty pieces be left for my own kid someday. Ol' Mose tell me that be the meaning of my life. Before, a guy's life be a haircutter or stocking at the Western Auto or be drunk and live in washing machine crates. I ain't got time for that. I gone be a hero, same as my pa's life done be for working on Stiles Creek and having a bomb. Ol' Mose made me see, not all at once on account I be too dumb. By and by I seen what he gone on about. It be hard, too, on account of first, I got to give up a nice place to stay and second, it be taming the unknown. I asked Ol' Mose why I got do it, not him or somebody else. He said it be my destiny. "Destiny" be a word he say all hushed up like he say "God" so I shut up. He done told me a million times I gone know when I be older sooner or later. Fuck all that.

The old man say, "Boy, tomorrow be all hazy and bright to you, like they be nothing you got to do. You wrong. You got four five things if you gone be old folks."

I goddamn hated his lists. "What they be?" I said, just purely sick and tired.

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"*One*, you gone leave this pothole piece of road and find out what be left of the world."

"Go on up by Linhart?"

He shook his grizzled gray head. "New Orleans, the biggest place you ever see. It gone be a regular museum of the old days, full of stuff you ain't never gone understand. You show your kid, *he* ain't gone understand neither, he show *his* kid, maybe someday somebody gone understand again."

"Yeah, yeah." I be watching two birds sitting on a wire.

"*Two*, you go into places and save stuff from the day the bombs gone off. You save books and tapes and this and that, even they don't mean nothing to you. You see the same book a lot, you know it be important. That's what you gone save and show your kid."

"Yeah, yeah." Again.

Three, you gone learn how you live in a blowed-up world with hungry, crazy people. They gone kill and eat you, you don't get them first. You seen Mad Max movies. You need brains, you need stuff, you got to know your next move. Your eyes be open wide for real or you just dreaming they is? You got to think. You be maybe eleven foot tall, but you ain't gone stay alive and be old folks if you be dumb."

"Yeah, yeah." The birds they flew into a golden rain tree.

"And *four*, you pray to God and you find you a woman and populate the earth."

"Yeah, yeah." By now the sun done gone down.

"I got us a can of stew for supper. You go stir up the fire, and after we eat I gone give you a present."

"Yeah?" I said, first time I be interested.

"Move you lazy ass, boy." Then he done gone away somewheres.

"Then what we gone do?" I call into the twilight.

Ol' Mose's voice come out of the darkness. "After them bombs, they be this sickness. You get the fever, you get the throwing up, you get the boils and sores, you don't be getting yourself around no more, then if you be lucky you die."

"That be just great, old man. It gone be all over for everybody, you telling me." First I come to hear it.

"You wrong again."

"We gone get the sickness, you say."

"Can't tell for sure, boy. Some people gone get it, some people ain't."

He don't be feeling like talking no more, so I fixed the stew and we done ate it. I wait for Ol' Mose to be saying something, see.

I knowed he be thinking around how to tell me, I use to watch my pa be doing the very same thing. Pretty soon he up and stood by the fire, watching the red coals popping. I lay a backlog thick as my leg on one side, scoop all the coals up against it, then

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pile on sticks and branches. Pretty soon the fire be jumping again, and I done stacked up a little tower of thick logs they last out the night. "You done good, boy," Ol' Mose said. Sound just like my pa. Put his hand on my shoulder too, hold something in the other.

"What that be?"

"You present, boy, like I done told you."

Couldn't be seeing it in the dark. "What that be?"

"A big old knife. You gone need a big old knife more'n just about anything."

"What for?" I be hoping he gone give me some neat present, Masters of the Universe Snake Mountain or something.

"You gone be needing it bad, boy. It gone keep you alive. You got to forget your kid's stuff, start thinking like old folks. A knife be the most useful thing a person got, he be all alone in the world."

I done think of nine ten things I want better, not even trying.

He wait for me to be saying thanks, but I go, "Anyway, I ain't gone be alone. I got you, you show me how to be old folks. Yeah, I learn slow, I be dumb like my pa, but I gone learn sometime. I promise."

Ol' Mose, he looked up into the sky where they ain't nothing but black rain clouds laying on a black night sky. He say, "You gone be alone sooner or later, you know that, boy." Then he wait a little bit and he say, "I do believe it be sooner." So I took the goddamn knife. It be a good knife, just like Ol' Mose say, in a leather thing I hooked on the rope around my cutoffs. Ol' Mose done stepped back a ways, let the light from the fire shine on me, and he nodded his head up and down. He done that a lot, from the first day I been knowing him.

So I ask, "I gone be O.K.?"

He say, "The hell if I know." Then he gone sat by the fire, even though it ain't cold or nothing. Next couple of days, I seen Ol' Mose he feeling bad. Sooner or later, he said, and he done put his money on sooner.

Come to find out, he be right about the sickness. Some people they done got it, some people be fine. Ol' Mose got the sickness, he plop down ugly dead a week later. I be fine, just goes to show. I done thought some about burying Ol' Mose, but I be just a kid and Ol' Mose be old folks. Kids don't be scratching out graves nor lifting up old folks nor rolling them into the ground, neither. So I just pushed and shoved Ol' Mose all quiet and peaceful on the floor of his snowball stand up under the shelves where he done keep his flavors. Then I closed his yellowish eyes and crossed his thin little wrists over his chest. Made me think when I seen him in his parking lot, last time I seen Pa. Ol' Mose with his arms folded and his head be moving up and down like a scared

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squirrel on a tree. Leastways Ol' Mose never need be nodding again, not unti he come up to Heaven and God in His infinite mercy figure out what to do with Ol' Mose.

He still be on the floor there except something come along and chew on him. I seen he ain't got a damn thing in his pockets, and then I be gone. I be on my own. God be looking out for me, Ol' Mose done said so. He say I be a hero, all right. I save the world, little bitty pieces, everything be O.K. I tell my story, other folks gone say yeah, I be a hero. Got to watch out for other folks. Ol' Mose done warned me about this girl call herself Misty, use to see her around all the time. She wake him some nights she hear scary secret messages from oranges, rusty nails, piles of leaves, stuff like that. Only half a message at a time though. She be like you get a phone call while you be messing with the hottest girl you ever seen, but this phone call say they be a sale right now on boil crawfish. A lot you care, right? Misty done be old. She not catch you eye, you know what I be saying? She go up to guys, she got her rumpled money they be fool enough to take money, she got cans of food or something, everybody be needing stuff. She go for young boys, she say, "Hey man, how you like to score some mollies, some dezzies? Got even better." Where God be watching, those times? "You pass by my house, little boy," she say, "I show you how the world go round." I give you candy, yeah you right. Ol' Mose done be kind and good, ain't much more to ask of a man, but Ol' Mose he dead. Misty *give* her ass away *and* a bunch of Tuinal, never seen her throw up even once. Wrong folks they get the sickness, wrong folks they die. Ol' Mose said I gone figure all that out I be old enough. Ol' Mose told me lots just before he gone and died. He in a hurry, see? Got to get out God's holy word. Then a hour later I be seeing Misty play her game.

I be old enough right now. I understand. Me, I just say fuck it.

I walked on up the highway nowheres special with nothing to my name but a old T-shirt and my cutoffs and my knife. Not so much as a cap or a pair of shoes. And I got the four goddamn things Ol' Mose done taught me. Not all that much, considering.

I knowed the highway be taking me to Linhart. From Ol' Mose's place, it be like fifteen mile. Just the other side of town they be two turnoffs, one up west to Delochitaches, the other east to New Iberia. I figure I take 14 to New Iberia, look around, find a bitty piece or two, then follow 90 up through Lafayette to I-10. It be I-10 gone take me to New Orleans; 90 go down and east, but it be longer and hits all these goddamn coonass towns nobody never heard of. I knowed all that from getting out the house with my pa.

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I left the snowball stand it be about noon and hotter'n a horny hog in a forest fire. I crossed the causeway over the bayou, then they ain't nothing much to see on account of all the places my pa gone they be on the old parish road. They ain't nothing off the side of the highway but cane fields. The closer I come to Linhart, they be less cane and more other crops, raggedy little green plants growing in rows, all dry and wilty-looking, soybeans or something. I be walking barefoot all my life and I figured it ain't gone be no problem now, but that highway done scorched my feet. I ain't never walked no fifteen miles before, neither. I got to stop and sit down now and then. They ain't no shade. It be after dark when I finally got to Linhart.

All the time I be walking, I be thinking about Ma and Pa, about Ol' Mose, about if I be old folks now myself. I ain't thinking about what I gone do next. I ain't seen nobody else the whole time, just a lot of banged-up cars throwed in the ditch or just skittered around on the cement. When Ol' Mose still be alive, it be like I run away or something, like everything still be the same at home and I gone go back there sooner or later and see my ma and pa. I done fooled myself into thinking that. But it be so goddamn *quiet* in Linhart it spooked me all to hell. I wished my ma never messed with my pa's bomb. I remembered whatall I use to bitch about, cutting the grass and clearing the table and stuff. Hell, cutting the grass ain't so bad. I use to go to sleep in my box by Ol'Mose's place hoping everything be back to normal come morning, but it all stayed destroyed. I prayed to God after Ol' Mose taught me, but it all stayed destroyed. I guess I understood that. You can't be expecting God to undestroy things for you every time. Ol' Mose he had no grudge and I figure I ain't, neither. Pa use to say old folks be hurting and not crying. I learned the hurting part early. The not crying be harder.

Now in Linhart I say to myself, "Where you gone sleep, boy?" They be all of Linhart to pick from, but all of a sudden maybe they be scary things hiding behind all the dark windows and doorways. I stood on the sidewalk figuring if I be more hungry or more tired. Then BLAM this chunk of sidewalk bust up on my right and BLAM again another chunk bust up on the left. My pa's bomb-when it gone off never scared me so bad, or the Gulf of Mexico where my house supposed to be. It got quiet again. I don't see nobody. I backed up a little, they a store or something behind me. I gone run in there if the door be open.

"Freeze, motherfucker!" somebody yelled. I done froze. "What you got?"

It be a girl's voice. She got herself hid, but she seen me O.K. I yell, "I got

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nothing. I got a knife."

"Drop the knife." I dropped the knife. "Move over about twenty feet," she yelled.

"Which way?"

"The fuck I care which way?"

I picked left. I stepped slow and careful, I don't want to be making her nervous. Maybe she be carzy, think I got grenades and a machine gun stashed under my T-shirt. I be waiting for the BLAM come blow my head apart, feeling all creepy inside, and then she come out this building across the street. She got a gun in her hand, a pack slung on one shoulder, a rifle slung on the other. She aimed the gun at me and crossed the street. I don't move or nothing. I figure I got plenty of time to breathe tomorrow if she let me live. She walked up and looked at me. I knowed right off this girl don't think much of me. The way things be, she got a gun and a rifle, ain't no reason she *got* to think much of me. She be older'n me, taller, pretty black hair, black eyes. She be wearing all camo clothes, she look like G.I. Joe. "A knife, huh?" she said. I don't say nothing. She be staring at me. "Where you be going with you mean old knife?" she asked.

"New Orleans."

She laugh.

I go, "What for you shoot at me?"

"I got the gun. Maybe you got something I can use. Lousy knife. If you be dead, I ain't gone worry you stumble on me in the night, decide you want to take my pack." Her eyes gone all narrow. "Or something," she said.

"Why I want to—"

"Don't make no difference," she said. "Pick up your cruddy knife, walk about ten feet in front of me. Don't forget I got the gun."

"Yeah you right, I ain't gone forget."

We done looked in trashed-out stores but they ain't nothing to eat. "Linhart be cleaned out a long time," she said. She found us a good enough place to sleep, but we still be hungry. I be on one side of the room, she be on the other. She done told me again she got the gun. I got to give her the knife again. She be nervous as hell about something. We got a couple of candles burning and she watched if I be asleep or just got my eyes shut or what.

In the morning she scrounged a couple dented cans of food out some trash can. "You got to look in the dumbest places," she told me. "Everybody already done got the food out the stores. Sometimes you luck out and find something, sometimes you got nothing to eat. No different from before."

She give me a can of corn and I looked at her. "No can opener, right?" she said. She gone into her pack and come out with a can opener. "Look, kid, you want to die or what? You got to get you a pack and the right gear." This be stuff even Ol' Mose don't be telling me about.

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She got only this one spoon so I kind of drunk the corn. I be looking at her the whole time. They ain't nothing I got to say to her.

"My name's Consuela," she said.

"You spic?" I asked.

Consuela blinked a couple times, put her can of food down real slow, unslung her rifle, and come over to me. Then she hauled off and smashed me in the face with the butt end of the rifle.

It be almost afternoon when I woke up. My whole head be like somebody done crammed too many sharp rocks inside. They be blood all over. "You ain't never gone say that word again," said Consuela. Pa use to say spic all the time, nobody never bothered him about it. First time in my life I say it, WHACKO. O.K., Consuela she don't like it, I ain't gone make no big deal out of it. They some people don't like they be called certain things. You just got to find out who and what.

We left Linhart a while later, me walking ahead of her. She give me back my knife, and we found me a pack and some stuff just before we got to Route 14. My face don't be feeling no better, but Consuela gone into a broke-up drugstore and come back and cleaned me off some. From then on we be pretty good friends.

A couple days later we be in Abbeville, Consuela said it be shorter if we cut north here to Lafayette instead of we gone on to New Iberia. I said O.K. I said O.K. to anything she told me. She asked me what I be doing out all alone, just a kid. "I ain't a kid," I said. "*Use* to be a kid. Stuff happen since then."

She be remembering sad things, I could tell. "I heard that," she said. Then she smiled. "Oh, Señor Machetero and his big knife!" Her black eyes got all big while she laugh at me.

"I be making it this far."

"Not if I put those bullets between your eyes instead of into the sidewalk."

"But you ain't done it. God be watching over me. Ol' Mose said so." So then I got to tell Consuela all about Pa and Ma and Skylab and the bomb shelter and the bomb Pa got from Little Gus Hebert.

"You mama started a goddamn nucular *war!*" She can't hardly believe it, but she never knowed Ma like I done. Then right there on the road it dawned on me what my ma done did, and even I be pretty impressed. Ma always whupped me around and took the belt to me nearly as good as Pa. That be one thing. But busting up the whole *world!* I got to admit that be something else. Who else's ma ever done that? Just goes to show.

Consuela liked when I be talking about Ol' Mose. "He be a good man."

"Yeah," I said. I remembered the four things he done told me I got to do. Number one be leave St. Didier Parish and look at the world. I be doing that right now.

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Number two be save stuff. Consuela never thought none about that. "What you mean?" she said.

"We done come to the end of the world and we got to start over. Ol' Mose told me I got to tell my kid someday all about what it done be like. I got to remember on account of they ain't gone be no books or movies or TV."

"They ain't?"

"Ain't gone be so bad, ain't so bad now except we got to walk everyplace. I don't miss TV all that much on account of I be knowing all the shows by heart and I can figure out the ones they ain't never gone make. Voltron and He-Man they always win, that all you need to know."

"And the books and stuff?"

"Oh, they be books and movie cassettes around in the dirt and all, but if my kid ain't gone read, the books they ain't gone be worth nothing."

"*You* read?"

"Some. Everyday Ol' Mose done worked real hard helping me read so I gone teach my kid. He got out his old book and he stood up and read out the book. Then he give it to me and I read some. Reading ain't easy but at least you always be seeing how far you be from the end."

"Ol' Mose got a book?"

"We read from it every day. This book called *Ardor's Furtive Yearning* by somebody or other. This customer, probably blowed up now, done left it behind at Ol' Mose's snowball stand."

Consuela looked at me like maybe I got a pebble of brain after all. She said. "You mean we supposed to be doing that?"

"Ol' Mose never said nothing about you, but I be saving the world for my kid."

"O.K., from now on we save things. What things?"

"The old man he said to remember the useful stuff first, then remember the nice stuff. All the rest we can forget about."

"That don't help a hell of a lot."

"Best I can do."

In Lafayette somebody done took a couple shots at us, but Consuela pulled me into this apartment building and we done slipped away. People they shoot at you more now than in the old days. We gone into a store and found the top ten bestselling books right by the busted cash register. They be *That's Glory for You* by Erma Bombeck, *The Last Place You Look* by Stephen King, *Springsteen Up Close and Personal* by Richard A. Morales, *A Simple Maroon Mistake* by John D. MacDonald, *New Fish* by Elmore Leonard, *Wexner's Wit and Wisdom* by Leslie Wexner, *I Can Run But I Can't Hide? Watch Me!* by Garry Trudeau, *Where the Elephant Went* by Shirley MacLaine, *The Brandon Tartikoff Story* as told to Marie Stepanik Bryce, *Time Spy* by Sandor Courane, and *Knowing When to Give Up*

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by Jerome L. Fishel. That be eleven, but Consuela wanted the Springsteen book. Both Consuela and me figured all that gone be enough to save the world. If not, let somebody else come back for more.

"You like Springsteen?" I said.

"Who you think I be liking?"

"You be too old for Menudo. You like Julio Iglesias."

"Just on account of my folks be Marielitos? You crazy? You think every girl got a Spanish name fall on her back for Julio Iglesias? Julio Iglesias can kiss my ass."

"If we got a radio, what you gone listen to?"

She give me this funny look. "The weather," she said. By then I be knowing when to shut up.

Half a hour later we dug up a tape player, some batteries, and some tapes. All the walking be easier then on account of the music. Ol' Mose told me about the old music, Ella Fitzgerald and them. He said we got to forget the new music, what he called my daddy's music, meaning my pa. My pa liked Led Zeppelin and Creedence, my ma liked Rod Stewart, I like Ratt and Mötley Crüe and that's how come the world ended. Ol' Mose said Ella Fitzgerald ain't never made the world blow up, and he be right about that. Ol' Mose said the new music be just noise and it gone go away, but the good music be here to stay.

Ol' Mose done told me a secret one time we be talking about girls. He told me he still be in love with Lena Horne. I don't know who the hell she be.

We found I-10 O.K. and gone east on it. They ain't nothing but mile after mile of swamp, and the highway be built up on cement stilts. Before we come to the exit for Breaux Bridge, we done got tired of the tapes we brung. Consuela said they ain't another town for like forty miles. She said I best get to like looking at stumpy cypress trees and white birds wading in the green water. The highway be no worse'n when the government be taking care of it, rough patches where the top layer be worn through, cracked here and there, potholes, wide chunks of railing missing where some dumb bastard done drove his car into the swamp. I told Consuela maybe they be some pieces of road they fall down between the stilts, then what we gone do? She said we cross that hole we be coming to it. We hiked for days and the highway stayed all in one piece. The bad times be not having nothing to make a fire out of and noplace to find more food and water, but Consuela she don't be looking worried.

The road run on ahead of us like a white tunnel pointing to the bottom of the blue sky. On both sides they be swamp and more swamp, and I liked the way it looked. Back home in St. Didier parish we done got marsh twenty miles west of Arbier and some swamp to the east where the bayou

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emptied out, but they never no reason why we gone into the marsh or the swamp. Where we be now, St. Martin Parish where the Atchafalaya River flow under the highway, they be tall trees in the water and on little patches of dry ground, cottonwood and willow and live oak all hung with Spanish moss. Sometimes the trees they stood over us like the legs of big old giants so tall they heads be hid in the black-green leaves up above. The trees be so close together sometimes they be no room to see through them. We can hardly see the water moving down there so slow around them.

"A year or two from now," said Consuela, "ain't gone be no more highway. Trees push it down, water knock it down, hurricane come blow it down, cement break up and fall down."

Sounded real dumb to me. "Yeah you right."

"You wait and see."

At night the highway be all weird and different. We seen swamp gas, we knowed what it be but it still be spooky. They be animals and birds and noises, and I be feeling all out in the open on that great big long stretch of I-10 with noplace to hide. I always be glad when it be morning again.

One night it be Consuela's turn to fix supper, she make beans and rice when we find knocked-down dead branches and got us a fire going. In south Louisiana you eat a ton of beans and rice. My ma use to say it topped off you tank. But when it come time to eat, Consuela give me a plate of black beans and rice. I said, "What the hell?"

She said, "Eat your food and shut up."

"These beans be black. Beans supposed to be red. Red beans and rice, that be what real people eat."

She looked at me all disgusted. "Now you eat some food from Cuba." She say it "Cooba." The beans taste O.K. except she don't use no hot sauce but at least she got some garlic. I eat anything it got garlic in it.

In the morning we pack up ready to go. Consuela come over to me with a funny look on her face. "Where we gone go?" she asked.

"That little town, Grosse Tete, you told me. Then Baton Rouge, then down to New Orleans."

She shook her head, her long black hair be swinging. It be even prettier when she done that. She put her hand on my shoulder, like my pa done and like Ol' Mose done too. They all looked off into the sky too. Maybe the sky be where you see God when you be old folks. Consuela put her hand on my shoulder and looked off into the sky. She said, "Boy, they be three things a man done where you come from in the old days." Before the bomb, that be the old days. "Three things," she said. "He be planting rice, he be planting sugarcane, or he be going out in a boat and looking for shrimps."

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I done thought about that for a while. I don't want to do none of them. "My pa he don't plant nothing and he don't be shrimping, neither."

Consuela nodded. "And where be your pa today?" She got me there. She be smarter'n I figured. "But they be the old days. Things done changed."

"Yeah you right," I said.

"Nobody gone buy you shrimps today."

"Got no shrimps."

"What you gone do with cane or rice?"

"Got no cane or rice."

"What you gone *do*, boy?"

All this time I be thinking how I ain't never gone back to school or cut the grass or nothing. Then WHAM! suddenly Consuela make me see sooner or later I gone have to shift for myself. Ain't gone be somebody taking care of me forever. Ma be gone. Pa be gone. Ol' Mose be gone. And Consuela be around only maybe another forty fifty year.

What I gone do then?

We gone a little later, still aiming east but moving more slow on account of our feet be hurting. I be thinking what Consuela done said, Consuela be thinking God only knows what. We gone by Grosse Tete, neither me nor she said a word. Come time for supper, Consuela stopped and looked out into the trees. I seen her, I knowed she be crying. I wait awhile. She turn around and said, "They always gone be trouble."

"They been trouble before."

"Yeah, but before, somebody got some of the answers."

It be my turn to put my hand on Consuela's shoulder. I said, "That what Ol' Mose done told me. Now it be me — me and you — we gone get the answers. Us and anybody else like us. Then we give the answers to our kids."

She still be looking sad. "It gone be a hard job."

"One step at a time," I said. That made her smile. We opened some Beefaroni for supper. While we be eating it cold, we gone on about food we be missing. Food we ain't never gone see again. Stuff cabbage, my ma made. Pigs in a blanket she called it. Consuela be wanting some Cuban stuff with rice and squids. I be nice and don't gag when she told me about it.

My pa and ma sometimes use to have a big old crab boil, the neighbors they brung food too, oyster loaves and jambalya and all. Now I knowed I ain't never gone see a muffuletta nomore nor andouille gumbo neither.

Consuela knowed how I felt on account of she said, "Come spring, we be catching crawfish. It gone be just like by you mama's, yeah you right. Suck the heads, pinch the tips. We ain't gone live out these cans forever. They be fruit and vegetables still in the world, meat and fish. We gone do just fine." See, I done cheered her up and then she cheered me up.

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Just goes to show. Not far from Baton Rouge, Consuela stopped and pointed.

"What?" I said.

"Ain't nothing."

"So?"

"Supposed to be a city there."

"Oh," I said. I looked, they ain't no buildings. Some bomb done punched out this hole, the Mississippi River done made a lake out of Baton Rouge, a big coffee-brown mud puddle. Me and Consuela be standing there, it be like me and Pa looking at all that water back home all over again.

"We best not go near there," said Consuela. "They be blowed-up parts of town all around the edges of the water. Folks you run into around places like that, they not the kind you want living next door."

I got no problem with that. We got off I-10 and took a road down through Plaquemine. I be thinking the hole we seen where Baton Rouge been, they gone be another one at New Orleans. I just kept my mouth shut, though. If they ain't no New Orleans, what about Ol' Mose's Number One? He done specify New Orleans. A little bit later I come to figure he really be talking about *anyplace* big and far away. Come to think of it, I already got Number One, Number Two, and Number Three covered. I gone most of the way. Ol' Mose be proud of me. Pa be proud of me too. I ain't gone guess what my ma be thinking.

A couple weeks later we see where New Orleans been. It gone too. They just water now. Lake Pontchartrain, the river, and the Gulf of Mexico done flooded on in. "Always wanted to see New Orleans," I said.

"They she be, the Crescent City. The Big Easy. The City that Care Forgot. Next year, I bet they gone vote to cancel Mardi Gras."

Then we ain't got noplace to go next. We got us a place to sleep in a nice old house on the west shore, found some jug water and some food. Heard some gunshots but they ain't meant for us. We stayed up real late just talking.

After a while, Consuela say, "You come here." I figure she gone put her hand on my shoulder and say something wise. Instead she done pulled me down beside her on the blanket.

"What you want?" I asked.

She laugh. "Just how smart be this Ol' Mose?"

"Smartest man I ever knowed. Taught me to fish, and we got some speckle trout once. He taught me to hunt, but we never shot nothing. Ol' Mose he ain't knowed everything though. He ain't knowed how to hunt, for one. He ain't knowed how to grow food. He always say that what the Winn Dixie be for, but the Winn Dixie gone south with the Gulf of Mexico. You ever knowed anybody like him?"

Consuela's eyes be full of tears. "I seen my mama's Aunt Inez die. Last thing she say, she tell me, 'Don't take

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the apple. This time around, don't take the goddamn apple.' She be out her head then. Half a hour later she be dead."

"You know what the hell that apple stuff mean?"

Consuela shook her head. "Ol' Mose tell you about girls?"

"Yeah," I said. Then Consuela put a hand behind my neck and kissed me on the mouth.

"Some things even Ol' Mose can't teach you," she said real quiet.

A long time later she looked at me again. "What you think?" she said.

I be too tired to talk. She just done wore me out.

"You like it?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"It gets better."

"Give me a minute or two."

She laugh.

Then I knowed what we done. We done Number Four on Ol' Mose's list. I nearly died right then. I remembered Skylab, how scared I been. I remembered the bomb, I remembered Arbier all blowed up. I remembered my ma dead, my pa how he left me, how scared I been. I remembered Ol' Mose, and he be dying. I remembered how I gone off then, I met Consuela and we done walked that whole way. I be scared from the getgo.

Ol' Mose, he done said populate the earth.

Damn it to hell, I done it *one time* with Consuela, I be feeling like I never gone walk again. I groaned and Consuela asked me what be wrong. "No-

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thing," I go.

She said, "Yeah you right."

I knowed we be sounding just like my pa and ma, goddamn it.

Populate the earth, my ass. I be seeing Ol' Mose somewhere, nodding his fool gray head and laughing like to bust. If the earth be needing *me* for the populating, we be in a lot of trouble. How long I gone live? How many kids I gone have? Maybe enough to populate a small-size trailer park. the earth, no way. I be needing help just populating St. Didier Parish.

I looked at Consuela. She even prettier she be asleep. It be real quiet. I let myself do a lot of thinking. They still so many questions. What if my kid asks why blackboards be green? Why they be eight in a six-pack? I don't know nothing.

When morning come I done figured out some stuff. I seen one thing, everybody I ever knowed done took the easy way out one way or the other. I guess I be doing the same, I ever get the chance. Meantime I be facing the world. I got Consuela in one hand, I got Ol' Mose's badass knife in the other, just like the movie poster for *Dodge City Ninja*. I done *got* to, so I gone tame the unknown, but they other things I rather be doing. I be Mad Max hisself, Rambo, Conan, Luke Skywalker, if somebody don't shoot and eat me first. The sun come through the window and I looked right into it. We see who blinks first.

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James White is a British writer known for his medical SF stories (collected in HOSPITAL STATION) and his novels, including THE WATCH BELOW (1966) and THE DREAM MILLENNIUM (1974). His latest is a first contact story in which the interpreters get help from an unusual source.

The Interpreters

BY
JAMES WHITE

When he was told to turn off the mountain highway and onto a narrow dirt road leading down into a wooded valley, Colgan slowed the car to a crawl. But it was not the rutted and uneven surface that was making him overly cautious; it was simply that, as he stared intently at everything around him, he was no longer in such a big hurry to get to where they were going. The trees and undergrowth and occasional wildflowers, which were lit almost theatrically by the intense orange spotlight of the setting sun, made him wonder why everything looked so sharp and three-dimensional and so extraordinarily beautiful.

Perhaps this was how the French aristocrats had viewed the world on their way to the guillotine.

The man seated beside him had been giving directions in a clipped but not unpleasant voice. His name was Warrender, and his impeccably casual civilian wear could not conceal a high but indeterminate military rank. Now he was communicating nonverbally by radiating extreme impatience. Colgan's family in the rear seat was being unnaturally quiet, too, so that it was Warrender who spoke first.

Diplomatically, he said, "We haven't far to go, sir. But if we shouldn't arrive until after dark, the clearing has been nightfall-ringed with floodlights."

Colgan increased speed, but not sufficiently to worry his wife.

They had driven about half a mile deeper into the valley, when Warrender said, "No offense intended, Professor Colgan, but I'm afraid I've never heard of your work. Linguistics isn't in my line, naturally, but I can't help wondering why you, in particular, were chosen for this operation,

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and why you brought your —"

He broke off as a sudden scream of complaint came from the rear seat, where young John, obviously bored with the silence and inactivity, had grabbed his three-year-old big sister's hair in his strong, stubby fingers and was trying to make Catherine's blonde pigtail come off. Ann detached the fingers expertly — she had lots of practice at it in recent months — and distributed two brightly wrapped pieces of candy from the store, reserved for such emergencies. While John began the difficult but, to him, engrossing task of removing his wrapping, Catherine held her candy tightly in one fist while her mother told her about the squirrels and deer and bears — small, friendly bears like her teddy at home — which she might be able to see if she watched carefully. She stopped crying.

"It's the wrong area for . . . ," began Warrender, then obviously decided that peace and quiet were more desirable than zoological accuracy. He went on, "I've kids of my own, you know, but I wouldn't want to take them with me on a jaunt like this. Still, you are the man they picked, Professor, and I expect you know what you're doing."

"They didn't pick him," said Ann, trying to hide the anxiety in her voice. "He jumped up and down and demanded that they send him. Besides, he's done this kind of thing before . . . ."

Warrender swung around in his seat to look at her, eyebrows expressing utter disbelief.

". . . His problem," she added, "is that he can't remember what exactly it was that he did."

"Dear," said Colgan, "if you can't say something reassuring. . . ."

"I'll say nothing at all," said Ann. She forced a laugh, then returned her attention to the children. It was too dark under the trees for Catherine to see even imaginary bears, and so she had reopened diplomatic relations with her baby brother. She was doing most of the talking, naturally, and it transpired that her purpose was both simple and selfish.

The track became more and more uneven as they descended to the floor of the valley, and the trees clustered so thickly around them that the sky was lost to view for minutes at a time. Colgan switched on his headlights, which revealed a road surface torn up by the recent passage of heavy, tracked vehicles. Twice he saw the shadowy outlines of tanks pulled up under the trees, their hatches closed and no lights showing. He was glad that all of his daughter's attention was engaged in conning her brother out of his Big Purple One.

From experience, Catherine had learned that the candy given to her brother, although somewhat squashed by his vain attempts to unwrap it, was slightly larger and had a much more interesting center than the long, cylindrical, silver-and-red-wrapped one

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she had been given.

She was ennunciating her words slowly and condescendingly, in the manner of an intelligent three-year-old trying to make a stupid baby brother see sense, while at the same time showing off her vocabulary to the grown-ups present, as she pointed out the advantages of her candy over that of John's. The wrapping had nicer colors, she insisted. She could twist it into a bracelet for him, and he could wear it on his wrist, and the candy was hard and chewy and would stay nice and sticky for a long time. While she was speaking, John made enthusiastic noises, ending with several seconds of gibberish spoken in a very serious tone.

"What did he say?" asked Ann.

"He said O.K.," Catherine replied. "But he wants me to take the paper off. He can't take his own paper off. He's a bit stupid."

Her tone suggested that the grown-ups might not be all that bright either, for asking unnecessary questions.

A few minutes later, Warrender raised a hand and turned away from Colgan to regard Ann and the children in the rear seat, but even the back of his neck and ear were registering his disapproval.

"We're nearly there," he said. "You can easily walk the rest of the way to the clearing, if you still want to go. But frankly, ma'am, I think this is ill-advised."

Firmly, Colgan said, "We have discussed what we would do in these circumstances a great many times, and we still want to go." As the other began to get out of the car, he added, "Alone."

Ann did not reply, and the mouths of the children were otherwise occupied.

Warrender closed his door again and rolled down the window so that the antenna of his handset projected beyond the shielding effect of the car body. He said crisply, "Check their lapel mikes and earpieces. Check recorders. Hold the floodlighting until they request it. They're leaving the car now."

There was enough light filtering through the branches and from the clearing fifty yards ahead to show the track clearly enough for them not to stumble. As they moved slowly forward in line abreast, and holding the hands of the children between them, Colgan tried very hard to remember the first time something like this had happened to him.

Instead of the dusk and chill of a temperate-zone mountain valley, that hillside had been covered by a bright green jungle steaming under the near vertical, equatorial sun. His parents, who had recently completed a spell of duty in a New Guinea hospital, and anxious to see a little more of the country than the neatly barbered hospital grounds, had accepted an invitation for the whole family to spend two

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weeks on a trip up-country. The young couple who had extended the invitation were responsible for the preliminary research and planning of a TV natural history program, and wanted congenial company of their own age as well as assistance with driving one of the two station wagons carrying their equipment and camping gear.

The accident had happened above a nameless village hugging the lower slopes of the Owen Stanley Mountains. The Colgans had been in the leading car, when some native children ran suddenly across the wet, muddy road, causing his father to brake, swerve, and lose control. Their car had ended up on its side facing back the way it had come, forcing the vehicle following closely behind them to drive around rather than crash into them.

But the road on that side fell away sharply into the narrow river valley containing the village. The other car skidded, went over the edge, rolled to the bottom of the slope, and ended upside down in the river. In spite of being more than a foot deep in water, it had exploded and burned, killing the TV people and scattering wreckage and glazing fuel from their reserve tanks over a large area of the village.

When the Colgans had climbed out of the car's sunroof, badly shaken but unhurt, they saw that several of the grass and mud shelters were on fire and there was a lot of confusion, shouting, and children crying. They did not see any casualties, but a growing crowd of villagers was encircling the toppled car, shaking fists or spears and screaming at them.

The natives were in an ugly mood, his father had told Colgan later, and at the time he had been uncomfortably aware of the fact that a generation earlier, these people had been headhunters and cannibals.

He could see it all in his mind's eye, Colgan thought as they approached the clearing, but he could not be sure that it was a true childhood memory or the product of imagination supported by adult stories heard repeatedly in later life. He simply did not know what had actually happened that day, but he had spent the greater part of his professional life in a vain attempt to find out.

The going was much smoother over the last fifty yards because the tanks had turned off into the trees before coming this far, and suddenly they came to a clearing lit in blue-gray monochrome by the late-evening sky.

"You've stopped, Professor," Warrender's voice whispered in his earpiece. "You're there. Can you see it?"

"Yes," said Colgan, wondering where his saliva had gone. "We're moving closer."

"Mammy," said Catherine suddenly. "You're holding my hand too tight."

Catherine's other hand was holding her baby brother's, who did not

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like his hand being held by big people, preferring, as now, to hold his father's index finger in a tiny, tightly clenched fist. Walking abreast and holding hands, they moved farther into the clearing.

"Is it an airplane?" asked Catherine.

"A sort of airplane," said Ann. Even in the dim light, she looked pale.

A sort of spaceship, Colgan thought, with a feeling of great fear and even greater wonder. Aloud, he said quietly, "Lights. I want to be sure they can see us coming."

As the floodlights mounted in the surrounding trees came on and slowly brightened, Colgan wondered why *they* had not reacted when the lighting was being rigged. Perhaps they already knew that there was nothing harmful to them in the simple lighting circuits. But if they had instruments capable of telling them that, did they also know of the many tanks and other forms of military frightfulness in the trees all around them, and of the outer cordon of heavily armed surface and air patrols sealing off the area within a twenty-mile radius from the news media, and of the ring of missile launchers intended to deal with whatever was there if it made any move that could be construed as hostile?

And if they knew all that, they would also know that the amateur photographer who had filmed their ship landing and the four aliens who had appeared briefly outside it — before he had become too nervous to focus and had run off — was in custody, along with everyone else to whom he had spoken or shown the photographs.

But that was giving the aliens credit for being omniscient, for being some kind of extraterrestrial gods. Colgan was no Stone Age aborigine whose island had been visited for the first time by a strange vessel containing beings who looked even stranger, and who therefore had to be deities. If the truth were known, they were probably as anxious about him as he was about them, and the sooner the fears on both sides were allayed, the better.

This was the first known contact with visitors from another technologically advanced and, hopefully, civilized world. It had to be handled carefully, without misunderstandings, but with minimum risk to the human race. When Colgan's advice as one of the country's foremost linguists had been sought regarding possible language structures, and he had seen the photographs of the aliens, he had demanded that they try it his way first.

He had been riding his particular hobbyhorse — considered to be a minor insanity afflicting an otherwise eminent and much-respected linguist — across the pages of the professional journals for a great many years, and they had allowed him to put his ridiculous ideas to the test.

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No great harm could come of it, they had decided, except possibly to Colgan and his family.

Naturally he was worried about the presence of his family, but he was fairly certain that they had nothing to worry about. The presence of a family unit showed trust, he had insisted, and remembered one of his colleagues telling him angrily that there was no fanatic like a quiet, gentle, academic fanatic. His pace slowed but did not stop.

The spaceship was wedge-shaped — a lifting body configuration, according to Warrender — and had no external projections or transparent areas that might have been viewpoints. In spite of the shaky hands holding the camera, the cinefilm left no doubt that the ship had dived steeply and force-landed in the only patch of level ground for many miles around. The brightening floodlights showed additional evidence of that. The treetops at one side of the clearing had been snapped off short, and the ship had left a peculiar landing track on the ground.

The technical people were intensely interested in how that track had been made. For the ground had not been torn up by direct contact with the vehicle's underside. Instead, it occupied one end of a long area of flattened grass and underbrush that was more than twenty times the width of the ship itself. Some kind of repulsion field, or perhaps gravity control, had been used during the final seconds of flight to brake the ship, and they were all most anxious to find out how it was done.

Colgan, as they walked slowly over the compressed vegetation, wanted only to find out if what he had done once could be done again.

They stopped about five yards from the ship's side, and within a few minutes a tiny aperture appeared in the area facing them and opened like a metal iris until it was more than two yards in diameter. A warm orange light fanned out from the interior, interrupted by the moving shadows of the creatures who were emerging.

John mumbled something incomprehensible, and Catherine said, "He wants another candy, Mammy. Me, too."

"La-Later," said Ann in a high, unsteady voice. The first of the four aliens, clearly visible now, was stepping onto the crushed grass.

The film, taken with a telephoto lens at extreme range, had not done the extraterrestrials justice — they looked much more alien and visually horrifying close up. Their bodies were cone-shaped, covered by oily, frondlike organs or perhaps clothing, and supported by four stubby legs. Four tentacular arms were mounted equidistantly around the waist, and another four tentacles — shorter and more slender and terminating in wet, bulbous swellings that had to be eyes — grew from the apex of the cone. All of

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the eyes were looking at Colgan as the first alien moved aside to let its companions come out. There was a faint, not unpleasant smell that reminded him of ammonia.

He stared anxiously back at the alien for several seconds, and suddenly his mind seemed to be playing tricks on him. For an instant he was seeing, not the extraterrestrial, but a naked Papuan hunter — thin, bearded, and with the animal bones in his hair held in place with dried mud; then the memory overlay faded. At least the alien coming toward him was not clutching a spear.

The other extraterrestrials emerged and lined up opposite the humans, the adults facing Ann and himself, and what had to be the large and small children facing Catherine and John respectively. The one in front of Colgan made a few deep, gobbling, incomprehensible sounds, then stopped. The larger and smaller children, in a higher register, followed suit.

Suddenly, John let go of his sister's and father's hands. He began waving his arms about in excitement and making incomprehensible noises of his own.

"What . . .," began Ann.

"John says they're saying 'Hello,' Mammy," said Catherine. "All of them."

Colgan cleared his throat nervously and murmured, "I think it's working."

Warrender's tone was guarded as he replied, "I don't know, Professor. Sometimes youngsters can let their imaginations run away with them. After all, hello is what one expects strangers to say."

Colgan did not reply because the memory overlay was back, hiding the four extraterrestrials behind a picture of the Papuan hunter, his mate and two young children at the forefront of the crowd of villagers surrounding the overturned car. Colgan saw the two naked, potbellied children. One of them was his own age, and the other his big sister's. Colgan's father had told him later that he had wanted to play with the other boy. Both sets of parents were too nervous to allow this at first, so they had talked instead.

The children had prattled away incomprehensibly to each other while the tensions all round had eased and the crowd became less threatening. It was by sheer accident that they discovered that the older children could understand what their baby brothers were saying to each other, and were able to pass it on to the parents. After that the grown-ups found that they were able to relay messages, very simple messages, via their children.

It had been easy, then, for the elder Colgans to apologize for the fire damage to the village — nobody had been injured, fortunately — and to get help in righting their car so that they could go back to report to the TV people what had happened.

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He still could not remember how the one-year-old Colgan had done it — the memories were all second-hand from his parents — but now it no longer mattered.

To Catherine he said, "Ask John to tell them that we are pleased to meet them. Ask if they are having trouble, and can we help them in any —"

"Tell them our intentions are friendly," Warrender broke in, "so long as theirs are."

Impatiently, Colgan said, "If either side's intentions were hostile, we would hardly be facing each other with children present! All four of them left their ship shortly after the landing, but stayed inside when your volunteers came close, so maybe that is normal procedure among star travelers in this kind of situation to demonstrate trust and friendship. And the business of using the very young as translators must also have general application, and we have just now found out about it."

"Out of the mouths of babes," said Warrender. "But how does it work?"

"I don't know," said Colgan absently. A large part of his attention was on the noises being made by his son and the younger alien. "There must be a linguistic mechanism by virtue of which very young minds can impress meaning onto nonsense sounds, from whomever they originate. But the ability is gradually lost with age and the acquisition of a disciplined spoken language. You must have noticed with your own children, if there was only a couple of years' difference in age, that the older one could frequently understand what the baby wanted better than you or your. . . . Excuse me, I think an answer is coming back."

Catherine was frowning in concentration as she said, "John says we look funny. Car broke down. Can't fix. Mechanic fix it now. Go away."

The first part of the message was probably an innocent remark by John's counterpart, not by its parents. But the final part, even making all possible allowances for translation, did not appear to be friendly.

"A mechanic!" said Warrender excitedly. "That's probably the closest your kids can come to saying the ship's engineer! We have to talk to him . . . it. Dammit, think of the things it could tell us about. . . ."

The request was passed to Catherine, who gave it, greatly simplified, to John. Gently, Colgan suggested to Warrender that, even if the alien engineer was willing to give such information to the Earth natives, the secret of interstellar flight and their other technological marvels would be of little use after being filtered through the mind and limited vocabulary of a one-year-old interpreter. But John wasn't doing too badly.

"Mechanic can't come out to talk," Catherine translated. "Big box, with lights. Go 'way."

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"It sounds as if the fixing is being done by some kind of repair robot," Colgan translated for Warrender's benefit. "But why do they want us to go away?"

After all, they were communicating, albeit in a limited fashion. It was the first time in recorded history that any such contact had been made between the human race and an off-planet intelligent species. Colgan was deeply hurt and bitterly disappointed that the aliens wanted to break off so quickly. Perhaps they considered the humans too unintelligent to waste time over.

Catherine had passed on the question without being asked. This time it seemed to be causing great agitation as the gobblings moved up and down the line between the young and adult aliens. Their tentacles threshed about, sometimes pointing back at the ship or toward the sky. The oily, frondlike growths covering the conical bodies were twitching, proving that they were not clothing after all; and even John was being bothered by something — when he turned to his sister, he seemed ready to cry. And while Catherine was speaking, she did not sound very happy either.

"He wants to stay and play with his funny friend," she translated. "But they said bye-bye. All fixed now. Maybe not fixed. Maybe a big bang. Go away. Please."

Warrender did not need a further translation. He said, "I wanted to know a lot more about those people, dammit. And now they're taking off with what sounds like a jury-rigged power plant, which just might go bang, and they don't want us to be caught in the explosion. But how big an explosion? The size of a car bomb, a megaton nuclear device? I don't suppose your boy could. . . ?"

Without waiting for a reply, he went on, "No of course not. A big bang is difficult to quantify for a child. Return to the car at once, Professor. We're getting out of here."

Colgan hesitated as he turned away. The only sound was the quiet, urgent voice of Warrender in his earpiece as he ordered the tanks to pull out, the remote camera to be put on automatic, and the air surveillance to be maintained. When the alien ship went up, in either sense of the word, he wanted it recorded.

The extraterrestrials were shepherding their young ahead of them into the ship. He put his hand on Catherine's shoulder.

"Tell them good luck," he said.

This time the reply was simple enough for John to handle his own translation. Screwing up his face with the effort, he annunciated carefully, "Hank-oo."

"Thank you! That's very *good*, John," said Ann. There were more alien gobblings being directed at him, but she grabbed both children by the arms and hustled them away before

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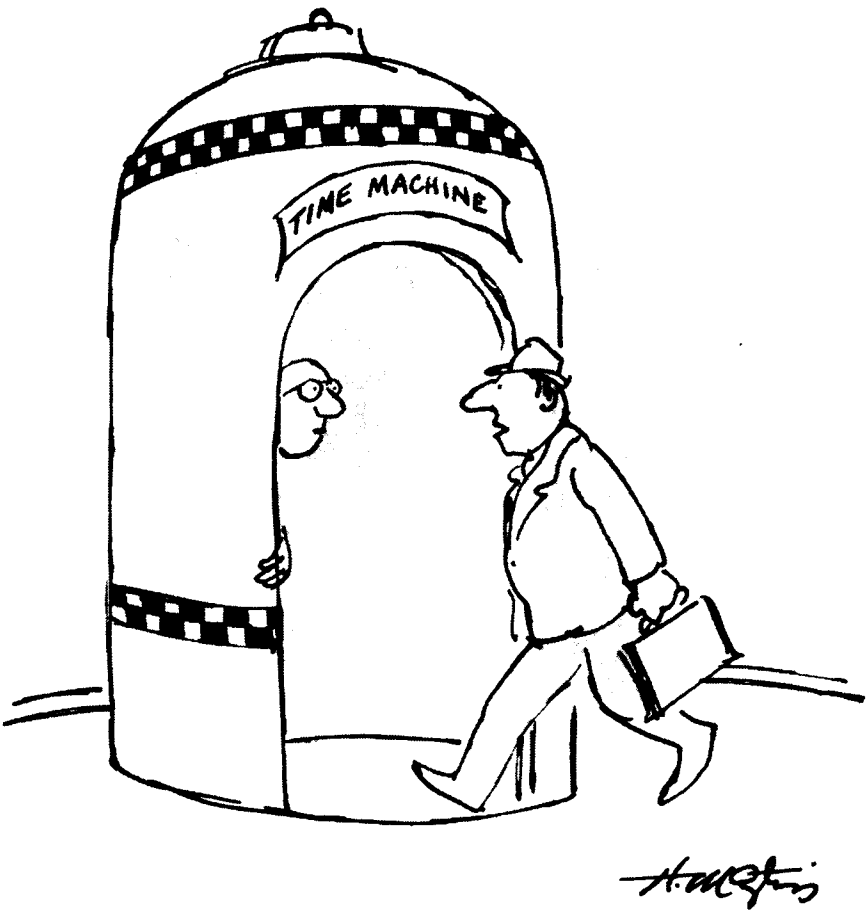
Catherine could translate.

The possible catastrophic malfunction did not occur, and the ship took off shortly after they reached the mountain highway. It was only then that Colgan remembered to ask Catherine to repeat the final message.

She was kneeling at the rear window, watching the big shooting star that was going up instead of falling down. Without turning, she said. "Thank you, friend. We'll come again."



"2048 A.D. and step on it."

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"I am a native of southern Colorado," writes B. J. Martinez, "with a great enthusiasm for the history, people, and art of this area and that of northern New Mexico. I live in the beautiful Greenhorn valley with one dog, one teenaged princess, and a cranky wood-burning stove. To pay the rent, I crunch numbers for a local manufacturing firm." "Uncle Green-Eye" is B. J. Martinez' first story for F&SF.

Uncle Green-Eye

BY

B. J. MARTINEZ

"When I was a boy," said Uncle Green-Eye, leaning forward to rub his gnarled hands in the warmth of the fire, "many strange things still happened in and around the Valley of the People."

The two young sheepherders across the fire sat quietly, not wanting to break the chain of memory in the old man's mind. A story would make the night go faster and the wind's chill less noticeable.

The old man spread his knotted fingers and stared between them into the fire. "You should have seen her the first night she came to Plaza de Tecolotes. She looked like a drowned bird, falling off her horse with weariness, her cloak and skirts soaked through with rain and mud."

The small party struggled up the steep trail, pushing to reach the settlement on the mountain's shoulder before dark. The high ridges were hidden in low-hanging clouds, and veils of cold rain draggled into the valley. There were three travelers: a man on foot, another on a tired but elegantly outfitted mule, and an epicene bundle of sodden clothing clinging exhaustedly to the back of a tall horse whose drooping head still betrayed his fine blood.

By the time they had picked their way over the rocks and soapy clay of the trail, the only light to be seen in the village shone murkily through the oiled parchment of the small windows in the row of low adobe buildings. Within the plaza, only the drowsy huffing of the oxen penned just inside and the muffled bleating of a sleepy goat could be heard. As the travelers rode in, the stillness was shattered by the yapping of a gang of

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dogs, who dodged away from the mule rider's whip with skill born of long practice.

The man on foot trudged wearily to one of the rough wooden doors opening on the square. He pounded his fist on it with a dull thumping.

"*Hola,* Bartolo! Open the door and see what I have brought you!"

Presently, the door opened with a creak of protest, and a man with sleep-spiked hair stood framed in the rectangle of dim light. A collection of heads peeked from behind him at various heights, or poked from behind the doorframe to peer into the night.

"*¿Pues,* `*mano?* What is it that brings you here at an hour when honest men should be sleeping or praying?"

The guide stepped back wordlessly as the man on the mule dismounted and strode into the oblong of light cast from the door. His spurs jingled as his boots struck the flagstones.

"You are Bartolo Garcia?"

The man in the doorway took his measure instantly. "*Sí, Capitán.*"

The grizzled sergeant smiled faintly at his impromptu promotion, but said only, "In accordance with the wishes of His Excellency the Governor, I have brought your kinswoman to you."

"My . . . my . . . kinswoman?" Bartolo Garcia goggled at the soldier, one hand clutching at the coarse fabric of his own shirt. There was a collective murmur in the house behind him.

The sergeant turned toward the tall horse, who flung up his head and rolled his eyes at his approach. Taking the reins from the nerveless hand of the rider, he dropped them to the ground. Not ungently, he reached up to lift the shapeless bundle down from the sidesaddle. Her knees buckled as her feet hit the ground. The man reached out to steady her, and after swaying uncertainly for a moment, she took two tottering steps forward into the light.

"May I present the Lady Kathe Maria Isobel de Oñate y Guzman," said the soldier with an ironic smile.

The old man smiled. "Even as tired and dirty as she was, we had never seen anything like her. She blinked and stared in the light like one of the little owls that lived in the pines behind the village and gave it its name. Even in the dimness, her eyes glowed like amber. Her face was the shape of a heart, with skin so fine and creamy that we knew she had never done a day's work in the sun. When we saw her hands, later, after Auntie Hipolita had stripped the silky leather gloves from them, we were sure that she had never worked in the house, either."

He shook his head. "Poor little thing. None of us knew what to make of her . . . least of all me, hiding in the corner and hoping that no one would notice me and throw me back out with the goats.

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. . .

The wool of the sergeant's cloak steamed gently as he stood with his back to the fireplace. Bartolo Garcia looked from him to the girl-child slumped on the crude wooden bench by the fire and back again. His face showed bewilderment and cautious indignation.

"But *Capitán.* I am a poor man who already has too many mouths to feed. Why do you bring this child to me? Her mother was a most distant cousin. Surely some kin of her father's would be better able to care for her than I?"

The sergeant's expression was grim. "Her father had no remaining family in the New World."

"But . . . but . . . I do not understand. How is it that she lost both parents so suddenly, and that there is no one in all the great city of Santa Fe to extend their charity to this poor orphan?"

The soldier drew air through flared nostrils and glanced at the child. The lines around his mouth deepened. "The child's mother was mad, and a suicide, abhorred by God and man. Bernardo Guzman was hanged twenty days ago . . . for sorcery."

Bartolo Garcia gasped and opened his mouth to remonstrate. The soldier cut him off.

"The child was kept for a week by the Sisters of Grace — in better times, her mother had sent her to them for lessons. However, His Excellency felt that her continued presence in the capital might be . . . disruptive."

Garcia opened and closed his mouth like a landed fish. Finally he asked weakly, "What did Guzman do . . . to be hanged?"

Drawing himself up, the sergeant replied, "He was seen by unimpeachable witnesses climbing in the window of his own house at night, in the form of a great catlike beast. When Guzman's most deadly enemy, who was a loyal servant of the governor, was found dead on the trail to the capital, mauled by a 'mountain lion,' these witnesses knew that they must speak."

The girl raised her head, the cocoon of her exhaustion pierced. "It is not true — my papa was not a bad man!" Her voice was shrill but sweet. Those closest to her, other than the sergeant, shrank back, and Garcia made the sign of the cross in the air before him.

"At any rate, they hanged him, and the wife cut her throat in mad despair. And you, Bartolo Garcia, are appointed guardian of this unfortunate child, by order of the governor."

He withdrew a small chamois bag from the pouch at his belt and tested the weight of it in his hand, then tossed it to Garcia.

"This should more than provide for her keep for a year. At the end of that time, if you have served faithfully, His Excellency will again provide."

"But I do not want . . ." began Gar-

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cia. His wife, a thin, sallow woman in black, clutched at his arm, hissing in his ear. He shook his head vehemently, but she tightened her grip until her knuckles whitened, sibilating, until at last he nodded a sullen agreement.

The sergeant bowed with exaggerated, sardonic courtesy. "I commend your wife's good judgment, Bartolo Garcia. Now, I must take my leave. The road back to Santa Fe is a long one."

The farmer was startled out of his preoccupation with the little bag. "Do you not wish to stay the night, *Capitán?* It is late and the rain is becoming heavier."

The soldier's eyes strayed to the girl sitting by the fire. "No . . . I will sleep better on the trail."

He crossed the tiny room with a stride and, stepping through the door, was swallowed up by the night.

An explosion of chatter filled the room. Garcia and his wife eagerly upended the little bag and proceeded to count the yellow coins that poured out. The children edged closer to the stranger, staring curiously and commenting one to another, until one, bolder than the rest, reached out to touch the fine, if bedraggled, stuff of her shawl. The girl rounded on him, glaring so fiercely that he retreated howling behind an older sister's skirts.

The mother's attention was distracted from the little pile of gold coins; she spoke harshly to the children, sending them scurrying off to pallets in the corner. She began to move toward the girl, who stared at her defiantly.

A stooped figure shuffled out of the shadows to stand between her and the girl. "Gently, Magdalena. She is weary and frightened half out of her mind. Leave her to me."

The other snorted, "Gladly, old woman."

The elderly woman walked slowly over to the bench and sank stiffly down on it beside the girl. She looked at her quietly for a moment.

"Are you hungry, *hijita*?"

The girl's blaze of defiance had taken the last of her reserves. She nodded dumbly, and a tear grudgingly streaked its way down her cheek, gleaming in the firelight. The old woman put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "Now, now. We'll be all right. We'll be all right."

The old man shook a knotted finger at his listeners. "I tell you, if it had not been for Auntie Hipolita, neither Kathe Maria nor this old man would have made it. Magdalena was a hard woman, hard." He shivered, remembering. "But *Tía* Hipolita, she always managed to hide away a bit of supper for us, and sometimes a little treat, like a handful of roasted *piñons,* or a bit of sweet begged from a

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trader." He stared into the fire, watching the past.

Garcia's wife wasted no time in fitting the girl into her own scheme of things. The girl's fine clothes she soon replaced with rough homespun and a rusty black *rebozo* to cover her auburn hair; the clothes disappeared entirely with the first trader who came through, replaced by a pair of tortoise-shell combs that Magdalena displayed proudly in her greasy hair. Kathe Maria became the servant Magdalena had long desired, since the woman was shrewd enough to realize that the governor's concern for the girl extended only as far as having her off his hands and out of sight.

The blood horse went into Garcia's stable. Eventually, the man was able to get a saddle on him, but the business never failed to make sour sweat bead his brow in anticipation of the next vicious nip.

The girl tried to resist. Once, she challenged the Garcia woman with childish hauteur, saying that her keep was paid, and that she should not have to be her dogsbody. Magdalena's reply was to take a stick of firewood and beat her nearly senseless.

The old man spat into the fire. "Garcia hovered around while Magdalena was beating her, going, 'O, O, O!'" He flapped his arms in imitation. "He was afraid she would die, and there would be no more yellow coins!"

• • •

But she did not die. She learned to work, and to sleep on a rough pallet, and to gobble the beans and tortillas that the old auntie saved for her as if they were chicken breast and flan. Under the bright mountain sun, her face turned gold-and-peach, and her little fingers became as stong as those of any child in the village.

She might not have minded her new life so much if it had not been so lonely. Magdalena's viper's tongue made sure that the people of Plaza de Tecolotes wanted nothing to do with her and that her own "sacrifice" in taking in an unwanted orphan was well known. Any sympathy for the child was frozen in the bud by recounting the unsavory details of her family history.

The grown-ups in the village turned their backs and whispered if she came near. Otherwise, they ignored her outright, unless forced to recognize her when she was on some errand for Magdalena. Then, they only grunted at her, and made the sign against the evil eye behind her back.

The old man's lip curled. "The children were not so kind. If they caught her alone, away from the house, they would throw stones and handfuls of dirt at her, chanting, '*Hija de bruja . . . hija de bruja*' at her; 'witch's daughter . . . witch's daughter.'"

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She endured it without reply the first winter, moving through time in a dazed way as she struggled with her endless tasks. One morning in the spring, the woman sent her out to dig *amole — the yucca root — to be used* as soap for hair and woolens.

It was a hard and dirty job, and although she hacked with all her strength at the muddy earth with the crude wooden spade the woman had given her, she made little headway toward getting the long, tough root out of the half-frozen ground. She leaned on the handle of the spade, tired and discouraged, and smeared freckles of mud and sweat across her face with the back of her arm. Glaring at the stubborn plant, she sighed in disgust.

"I can help you."

She jumped, startled by the piping voice behind her. A scrawny boy slid down from the rocky outcroppings he had been sitting on to watch her dig. His arms and legs stuck out like sticks from his dirty white shirt and trousers, and his feet were bare, in spite of the chill of the muddy spring earth. His face had a strange, unbalanced looked because one eye was dark brown and the other a startling green.

She eyed him suspiciously, then shrugged. "I can use the help. This thing has a root longer than La Garcia's tapeworm." She watched defiantly for his reaction.

He doubled up in laughter. "Very good, girl. She must have a big one, eh, to eat so much and stay so skinny."

She watched him for a moment, then turned back to the yucca. "Are you going to stand there making noises like a sick donkey, or are you going to help?"

He began to dig, badgerlike, with his hands and the mud flew. They dug silently for a while, and then the girl said, offhandedly, "You'll get in trouble if any of them see you helping me."

He spat and enunciated an obscenity. "Those ones. I was born in trouble with them."

She looked at him with an inquisitive lift of the brow. "I thought you belonged to the Garcias."

He gave her a lupine grin. "My mama was the child of Old Man Garcia's dead sister, but one day, when she was down at the river, doing the wash, the *Apachu* took her and some other women. She was the one who got away and came home, but by that time she was carrying something with her. Me."

The girl thought this over. "But if you're part Indian, why do you have a green eye?"

"*¿Quien sabe?* These ones call it *ojo de diablo,* devil's eye." He grinned again. "My mama had brown eyes — she was very beautiful."

"Where is she, then? I haven't seen any beauties around here!"

The boy shrugged. "She died when I was a baby — it was a long walk

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home, and when she got here, they treated her like dirt. Between me, and the *Apachu*, and these *cabrones*, her heart broke, and she died. But Tía Hipolita told me she was the prettiest girl in the village . . . once."

"Oh."

The boy sat back on his haunches and stared out into the huge expanse of the valley that spread out below the village until its horizons were lost in light shimmer and haze. "Maybe someday I'll go hunt for my father — go live with him."

She got up, dusting her hands, and said flatly, "They'd kill you — or make you a slave."

"Maybe . . . maybe that'd be better than living with these pigs who think that I have the evil eye, that I'm a bad one . . . like you."

Her face flushed. "I'm not a 'bad one'!" She hacked angrily at the muddy earth. "They tell lies about my papa and my mama. My papa was not evil . . . he was a wise man, he knew about everything — the stars, and other lands, and healing people, and . . . and *everything*. He had many books, and he taught me from them, wonderful things that even the Sisters did not know. But he sent me to study with the Sisters, too, to learn all that was proper about the Faith, and Our Lord, and His Blessed Mother. He was good, and kind, and Mama and I loved him more than anything. And you should have seen my mama . . . she was *truly* beautiful. In the evening when the candles were all lighted, she would wear a fine gown and play the harp that Papa brought her from Spain . . . she would sing for us."

The girl leaned on the handle of the spade and in a small, clear voice, sang a fragment of song.

And when, my heart, the swallow returns,
Then joy will return,
For you will come back to me . . .

As she stood there, the sun kindled the coppery tendrils that had escaped the *rebozo*, and lit flecks of gold light in her eyes. The boy watched her without expression, then grinned and shrugged.

"A pretty song, little bird, but for now we had best get this amole out of the ground, or the beautiful Magdalena will make you sing with a piece of kindling."

Her shoulders slumped and she made a strange sound in the back of her throat, but she went back to digging.

"That was when the other children found us. We didn't know that they were there, until a handful of mud hit her in the back of the head. She spun around, and there they were, dancing around us like a band of devils, shouting taunts and insults at the both of us, but especially her. They threw more mud, and stones. A rock

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hit her in the forehead, and a trickle of blood began to run down into one eye.

"One of the big girls, I think it was Maria de la Cruz, gave her a shove and snatched at the end of the shawl wrapped around her neck.

"'Witch-child,' she taunted. 'Your mama cut her throat and your papa hung by his.' She yanked cruelly on the end of the *rebozo*.

"Kathe Maria clawed it away from her throat and leaped on the older girl with a snarl."

The old man chuckled. "Maria de la Cruz didn't know what she was tangling with, a girl or a wildcat. By the time the rest of them had pulled her off, the little one had raked her face into ribbons, and had left black marks around her neck from a grip that it took four of them to break."

He chuckled again. "They left her alone after that, and so, she would talk to me, just to ease the loneliness, even though I was three years younger and only an ignorant boy."

They spent hours talking, as the boy helped her with her tasks. She told him wonderful tales that her father had told her . . . of the conquest of the great empire to the south, with its learned priests and roomfuls of gold, and of the fabulous cities in the north, yet to be discovered, even richer than those of the south. The boy's mismatched eyes grew wide as saucers when she described her father's alchemic experiments — the retorts seemed to steam and bubble before them, and he could almost smell the strange, metallic odors.

He liked it best, however, when she told him of her times with the good Sisters, because when she spoke of them, her face was filled with a sweetness and peace that erased the shadow of pain that haunted it. He was as ignorant of the teachings of the church as any savage, knowing only the mumbled rituals that Magdalena had pounded into him that he might not disgrace them when the priest paid his semiannual call. He did not altogether understand the things that Kathe Maria talked of, but he liked to hear the fine tales of saints and martyrs, and of La Conquistadora, the Blessed Lady, who led the Spaniards to victory.

They were outcasts, the both of them, but the boy was the more fortunate. When he had had enough of Plaza de Tecolotes, he would disappear for weeks at a time into the mountains or out onto the vast floor of the valley. He was already a skilled trapper and a deadly shot with the sling an older cousin had made for him in a rare fit of kindness. The village never really knew how he survived during these absences, but then, no one really cared.

Three years passed. Each fall, the

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governor's man would return, take a perfunctory survey of Kathe Maria's condition, and leave the little bag of coins. The late summer and fall were a little better for the girl, because Magdalena would not strike her in the face during that time, lest she be marked when the governor's agent arrived.

In the autumn of the fourth year, the soldier did not come. Garcia and his wife waited anxiously, and finally heard news from a trapper traveling over the mountain. The governor of Santa Fe, caught in a struggle for power with the church for dominion over the colonials and Indians, had been taken up by officials of the king on charges of heresy and abuse of the trust of his office. He was to stand trial that winter, in Mexico City. There would be no more little bags.

Magdalena raged. She used the girl like a slave and grudged her every mouthful of food and every threadbare rag that went on her back. When the cold weather came on and old Hipolita made the girl a pair of moccasins to replace the long-outgrown boots, she railed at the old woman and shook her like a bag of sticks, until Garcia managed to point out to her that the girl could do no work with frostbitten feet.

Kathe Maria observed with some wonderment that Garcia himself seemed inclined to treat her more kindly since she had lost her status as "boarder." He spoke to her ingratiatingly, and began to sidle up to her in the dimness of the stable, or in the scrub oak behind the house when she was gathering kindling, and to touch and to pat her in a way that disturbed her.

The old man's mouth was drawn in a grim line. "She told me about it. She did not really understand what he wanted, but his touch filled her with disgust. Although I was younger, I had far more knowledge of such things than that motherless girl, and I explained to her as best I could, in the crude words that were the only ones I knew. She listened with a sick, frightened face, and only nodded and did not speak."

He grimaced bitterly. "There was little I could do to help her. In the four years since she had come to Plaza de Tecolotes, she had grown to be beautiful in a way that shone through the rags and the dirt. She was as different from the other girls in the village as . . . as . . . a pearl is from river pebbles. I could only warn her not to let herself be alone with old Garcia, and to watch for him when she had to leave the house."

That winter, the boy stayed away from the village for long periods, even when the snow lay like a huge, choking feather bed over the valley and the mountains. He was noticed only when he returned, because he usually brought meat, or fine, winter-

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thick pelts. When Kathe Maria would question him about how and where he spent his time, he would only grin at her and spin some crazy story about living with a coyote, or having fallen down a hole into a place where it was warm and the game was always easy to hunt. She would shake her head at him, but she was always so glad to see his ugly little face that she could not be angry.

One day in early spring, when the mountainside was beginning to stream with miniature torrents of melting snow, the boy returned with a gift for Kathe Maria. It was only a puppy, a small, dirty, wiggling ball of fur of no discernible breed, but enthusiastically affectionate, in the manner of pups.

With the connivance of the old auntie, the boy and the girl fixed a bed for the little creature in a corner of the stable. The three stole scraps and kept bits of their own meals for the puppy, and it was soon a fat little clown who returned Kathe Maria's love with interest.

"It was the puppy that brought matters to a head. If I had not given her the puppy, she would never have been cornered in the stable by Garcia. She had entirely given up visiting her fine horse there, for fear of the man's pestering, but she could not resist going to play with the little dog."

She crept out after supper to see him. The days were growing longer, and the blue dusk was just settling into the canyons. The mountain and the village glowed rose and gold with the setting sun. She sat on a heap of hay in the corner, feeding the pup supper scraps and talking to him softly, happily unmindful of her life for a while.

"I don't know whether Garcia saw her leave the house and followed her, or whether it was just bad luck that, on some business of his own, he found her there. He soon had her backed into a darkening corner, taking the puppy away from her and throwing it carelessly back into its nest. As I slipped through the doorway, it was already whining and shivering, and yapping at Garcia as he pawed the girl."

Uncle Green-Eye lifted a sardonic brow.

"That Bartolo Garcia . . . such a brave man! With his wife, or with another man, he was *sin espinazo*, a spineless whiner, but with a child or a girl, he was, oh, very brave."

Garcia was pulling and clutching at the girl, and she was fighting back as best she could, not making a sound. She raked at his face like an angry kitten. He yelped and knocked her back into the hay with his fist, and threw himself on top of her.

Before the boy could move, he himself was knocked out of the way

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by a fire-breathing fury. It was Magdalena Garcia, lifting a lamp high, the better to see the struggle in the hay. At her first shriek of rage, Garcia threw the girl aside and staggered to his feet, tugging at his clothing. He took a step toward his wife.

"Magdalena! Magdelena! Forgive me!" He began to blubber. "It was the girl . . . she tempted me. She is a witch! How can a man resist the wiles of a witch?"

The woman looked at him with a face like a skull, the white showing all around the coals of her eyes. She turned to the girl crouching half-dazed on the floor.

"So, whore and daughter of a cursed whore, you will corrupt my husband, will you?" The words had a razor's edge hiss in the suddenly heavy air of the stable.

The girl shook her head, unable to speak.

The woman's eyes fell on the whimpering puppy. "And bring your familiars under my roof?" She snatched up the tiny dog and swung him by his hind legs against a stall.

Kathe Maria and the puppy screamed at the same time. Then there was silence.

Where Kathe Maria's life had been hard before, it now became deliberate torment. The Garcia woman, already bitter because there was no more gold to be had in return for the girl's presence, became a demon of cruelty after Garcia's display of lust for her. Before long, she shrewdly devised a twisted plan to use the girl for further gain.

Down the mountain from Plaza de Tecolotes, in Weeping Woman Canyon, lived old Delberto Arellano. He was a strange old man, who came up to the village only if a trader was expected from Santa Fe and he needed supplies, or when he needed to replenish his supply of rotgut from Pedro Casias's still. The children would dance around him when he came to town, jeering and singing a song to him about "El Viejo," the vain old man who still liked the pretty young girls.

Old Delberto had worn out five wives. Instead of burying them in the little graveyard by the village, he had interred them behind his house in the canyon. The graves formed a half circle behind the decaying adobe house, and in his cups, he was wont to refer to their occupants as *mis palomitas,* "my little doves." None of the "doves" had given him any children, and it was difficult for the villagers to fathom what could have killed so many healthy young women, other than childbearing.

Village gossip skirted uneasily around the subject, for there was no evidence of any wrongdoing, and in addition to being very ugly and very dirty, Delberto Arellano was very rich, and furthermore, had connections in the capital.

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It had been two years since the old man had dug the last grave behind his house and placed the wasted form of his fifth wife in it, without benefit of mourners or priest. He had taken to coming into the village a little more often. Even for so solitary a creature as Delberto Arellano, the air of Weeping Woman Canyon sometimes became oppressive, filled as it was with little breathings and susurrations, like breath drawn after a sob.

So, he would come and sit on the bench in front of Pedro Casias's *Jacalê*, leaning back against the rough poles of the wall, sucking occasionally at an earthen jug, and watching the comings and goings in the plaza down the hill beneath hooded lids. Only the rapid movement of his opaque, yellow-brown eyes betrayed his keen interest in the scene below.

Mothers with daughters just blooming tried to keep them from falling under the gaze of Delbérto Arellano. They would set them to tasks within the house on the days when he came into the village; have them sweeping and tamping the dirt floors all the day long, and carding wool even when the sun and the birds cried for all to be out and about in the fine spring weather. The younger girls complained, but the older ones hushed them, and only shuddered wordlessly when asked for explanations. Not a one of them wanted to be observed by him, for who could be sure that her parents could afford not to accept the old man's bride-price, should he fancy her?

Magdalena, however, did everything she could to thrust Kathe Maria under Delberto's nose. When he sat in front of Pedro Casias's shed, drinking slowly and meditatively, as though his mind were on other things, she would find twenty errands for the girl to run that would bring her across the line of his sight. Kathe Maria, innocent, and not party to the village gossip, found nothing strange in Magdalena's finding new tasks for her to do, but when the woman began to complain about her appearance, and to order her to comb out the long snarl of rust-red curls, and to brush her dress and adjust her shawl before she left the house, the girl wondered which one of them was going mad.

She did not begin to suspect the Garcias' plans for her until the evening that she came back from drawing water from the creek to find old Delberto Arellano sitting on the bench before the fire. Bartolo and Magdalena were not famous for their hospitality, but rather for the tight string on their *masa* sack, and the girl wondered at the presence of a visitor. As she lowered the heavy buckets to the floor, she could feel his eyes on her.

Bartolo was sitting on a low stool, near the old man, while Magdalena's black presence hovered in the corner.

"You see, *mi amigo*?" Bartolo whispered conspiratorially to the motion-

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less figure on the bench. Its head inclined slowly, once.

Auntie Hipolita limped out of the shadows to grasp the girl's arm. "Come, niña. Come and help me to put down straw for the animals." She began to draw the girl out of the room.

"No!" Magdalena snapped. "The girl will help me to serve our guest, señor Arellano." She handed the girl a bowl that had been warming by the fire. Kathe Maria was amazed to see that it contained *capirotada,* the rich holiday pudding with sugar, cheese, and nuts, topped with heavy cream.

As she handed it to the old man, she could smell the foulness of his breath when he whispered, "*Gracias, señorita.*" She returned to sit in the corner of the hearth, but could feel him watching her the whole time he mumbled and smacked over the pudding.

Well, of course, soon enough the whole village knew what Magdalena was up to, but no one would lift a hand to help the girl. For one thing, they believed Magdalena's tales about her, and for another, they were glad to have it be the daughter of strangers rather than one of their own who was going to go back to Weeping Woman Canyon with old Arellano."

Kathe Maria protested frantically. When Magdalena explained her fate to her, gloating over her distress, she wept and argued until the woman had Garcia hold her so that she could beat her. Garcia enjoyed this very much, and his wife was careful only not to mark the girl's face, because, as she said, "When the old one gets her clothes off, he won't care about a few bruises." That night the girl crept out of the house, intending to run away.

"If I had been in the village, I could have helped her, and she might have made it. At least I would have known enough to cover her tracks. But I was far out on the floor of the valley, hunting, and running as wild as the spring herds.

"I got back just in time to see them dragging her up the hill in the slanting light of the afternoon. Garcia even had a rope tied around her neck, as though she were some kind of animal, and when he yanked it, she would stumble forward helplessly. I was glad that I could not see her face for the long red hair that fell over it. I trailed along behind them at a distance. I did not know what her trouble was, but I knew that my only chance to help her would lie in stealth. She must have lost a moccasin somewhere on the mountain, because as I followed, I could see spots of blood in the dusty hollowed track of one bare foot."

The boy slunk into the Garcias'

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stable, hunting for Auntie Hipolita. The old woman was nowhere to be found. Finally he asked one of the brats playing in the yard. The child indicated the house with a jut of his chin.

"Go get her for me."

"I can't — she's sick."

With a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, the older boy asked him what was wrong with her.

"She was arguing with Mama, and Mama hit her and she fell down, so they put her to bed."

The boy breathed an oath, then, feigning indifference, began to busy himself feeding the oxen. The little one soon lost interest and drifted away, and the boy hid in a corner to wait.

"Before first light the next day, Bartolo Garcia stumbled into the stable and saddled the fine, tall horse that had been Kathe Maria's. He had the devil's own time doing it, too, because the horse was full of early-morning beans and acted as if he hated the very smell of Bartolo Garcia! Finally he managed to get the saddle on him and to scramble aboard. I stuffed the corner of my shirt in my mouth to keep from laughing out loud at the sight of that wizened monkey hanging on practically sideways while the horse danced and pranced and, at last, took off down the trail as though all the spirits of the dead were after him."

• • •

In the late afternoon, Garcia returned. The horse, although still mettlesome, was tired and dusty, carrying two riders. Behind Garcia rode a shabby, fat friar from the mission at Los Ciruelos, well known as a drunkard and a lecher, and a man whose ecclesiastical services might be bought cheaply.

The two slid down stiffly from the horse's back. Garcia, catching sight of the boy standing in the shadows, grunted an order to him and threw him the reins. The man and the corrupt Brother vanished into the house.

Uncle Green-Eye shook his head in scandalized remembrance of the events that followed.

"In those days a wedding was a *wedding*. There was the *pedimento*, the asking for the hand, and then the *prendorio*, the fine banquet given by the bride's parents, with giving of gifts to the bride by both families, and then . . . ah, then, the ceremony itself, with the *padrino* and the *madrina* escorting the bride and groom to the altar to be joined in holy sacrament. And afterward, more feasting and dancing and rejoicing, and the blessing of the newlyweds as they began their new life together.

"But there was neither blessing nor rejoicing for Kathe Maria. Just before dark I saw Delberto Arellano coming up the trail out of Weeping Woman Canyon. Within an hour he

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was ready to return, but not alone.

"I saw them come out of the house, the old man gripping the girl's arm with fingers of iron, and Bartolo and Magdalena following along to make sure that she was delivered to her new home. As they passed the stable door, I could see the cat's grin on Magdalena's face, and wondered how much of Arellano's gold clinked in her pocket."

The storyteller's face set like flint as he stared unseeing into the flames.

"I watched them go down the trail into Weeping Woman Canyon. The lantern in Magdalena's hand bobbed along like a firefly in the dark. In despair, I followed them down, hidden in the dark and close enough to hear Kathe Maria's ragged breathing.

"I would have given my soul to free her . . . to spare her the shame and torment I knew awaited her." There was a long silence.

Finally he glanced wryly and a little diffidently at the young men. "You never love again as you do the first time, you know . . . even if you are only an ugly little boy."

He cleared his throat. "Be that as it may, I followed them down the trail, staying close to the sheer rock wall, and hunching in the black shadow of a twisted piñon when the trail gave onto the barren floor of the canyon. I saw Delberto Arellano make a small, mocking bow to the Garcias, and saw his lips move, but the thick air of the canyon seemed to blur his words. He pulled the girl inside the house, and the heavy door swung shut with a thud.

"Bartolo and Magdalena just stood there for a moment, looking stupidly surprised. I guess they had expected old Delberto to invite them in for wine and cakes! But they turned and made their way back up the trail, and were soon congratulating themselves on their cleverness. They passed so close to me, where I was hiding in the shadow of the piñon, that I could have tugged on Bartolo's pant leg.

"Somewhere in the house a light flared, glowing dimly through the oiled panes. I crept closer, until I was against the wall of the house itself. There was no sound.

"I leaned against the scaling adobe wall, chilled and miserable . . . the bear was walking his slow round overhead, and one star seemed to wink at me in a leering way. The breathings of the canyon tickled my neck and played with my hair until I was ready to scream. When I heard a cry of pain and outrage from within the house, everything built up within me exploded, and I hurled myself at the door, hammering on the splintering wood like a mad thing. I shouted threats and curses at the old devil within, but there was no reply. I wore myself out, but it did no good."

The old man stopped, panting for breath as if he had been running. The young herders themselves held their

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breath, waiting. A coyote warbled on the far ridge.

"What happened then, Uncle?" asked the youngest one, his eyes enormous in the firelight. Even his brash older brother was sitting with his mouth open in fascination, prominent teeth glinting beneath the wings of his luxuriant mustache.

The old man extended the well-crafted pause a moment longer, then began to speak in a hushed voice.

"I sank back against the adobe wall, the tears on my face mixing with the dust of it. Now you know how thick the walls of even an ordinary house are?"

The boys nodded, knowing well the three- to four-foot thickness that saved the warmth of the fire in the winter and shut out the heat of the summer sun.

"Well, old Arellano had made the walls of his house even thicker — it was more like a fortress than a house. Nonetheless, as I leaned there against that wall, I felt it quiver — shudder like calves'-foot jelly — with the release of some great silent power. It was like thunder without sound, just a huge, silent shaking. I dropped to all fours, because it felt as if the earth were going to shake, too, and as I crouched there to one side of the door, it suddenly flew open, flung open outward the wrong way, with a gunshot crack of hinges and a rending of wood.

"The door slammed back against the wall, missing me by the thickness of a peseta, shattering the adobe's outer shell. I cowered on the earth, mindless with fright, and a gush of air exploded out of the doorway, a gust that carried a strange scent, as clean as pine, but with the sweetness of roses, and under both, a musky smell that made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

"Did someone or something rush by me in that gust of air? I could not tell — there was only starlight to see by, and the shadow inside the door was as black as my terror.

"The silence that fell afterward was as deep as the shadow. At last, I got up on shaky legs and, thinking of Kathe Maria, made myself step into the dark house.

"A smudgy glow came from the dying coals of a stingy fire — I used one of the coals to light the stub of a candle I found on the table. There was no sign of life or death in the front room, only an overturned bench and a rucked-up rug in the path between the outside door and the only other door. My moccasins whispered on the boards of a wooden floor. Delberto had indeed been rich!

"I went to the other door and pushed it open, and as I did, I heard a muffled choking.

"The second room of Delberto Arellano's house was a bedchamber of a kind I had never imagined, let alone ever seen. In the middle of the room, massive as a boulder, was an

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immense, gilded bed. It had four posts holding up a kind of tent over it, and it was hung with curtains of a heavy material whose golden threads glittered even in the flickering light of one candle. It was so high that there was a little stool beside it, which one might step up on in order to get into bed. As I moved closer, I could see that the linens on it, rich with lace edging though they were, were foul with grease and dirt. At each side of the bed stood tall, carved candelabra, with their fat black candles only half burned. I could still smell the hot wax reek from their sudden dousing.

"A big oval mirror that tilted back and forth in its frame stood at the foot of the bed. It reflected only tangled bedclothes in its tarnished depths. I could see no sign of any living person — but I heard the choking sound again.

"Moving toward the bed, I felt soft folds of fabric beneath my foot. When I stooped and picked it up, the cloth fell into the folds of what had been a beautiful dress. It must have been very much like the ones Kathe Maria had told me about her mother wearing. The top of it was made with lace as fine as cobwebs, and the skirt was heavy and shining, the color of moonlight — where it was not covered with dark, wet stains. It was so slashed and rent that it hung in tatters from my hand. I dropped it as though it were on fire, and then saw the spatterings on the broad pine planks.

"The choking came again, louder, and mixed with a gurgling and windy moaning. I raised the candle and looked around, but could not see anyone who could be making such a terrible sound. At last, I thought to look under the bed.

"There, curled as tightly as possible next to the wall behind the headboard, was Delberto Arellano. His eyes were squeezed shut so tightly, you would have thought he was trying to keep his eyeballs from escaping, but when I stuck my head under the bed and spoke to him, they opened and rolled like white slugs back into his head. He gave a gurgle and slumped over on his face in the dust balls under the bed.

"I crawled under and, grabbing his wrist, dragged him out. He came sliding, limp as a freshly dead rat. He looked as though he had been beaten with a cholla cactus, but one with bigger, steelier needles than had ever been seen. His face was a pattern of cuts streaking blood, and I knew that it must be so with the rest of him, because blood was still soaking steadily into his ancient nightshirt. I rolled him over, and his head lolled back. His throat was crisscrossed with a series of long slashes, deep enough for pain and shallow enough not to kill, but to prolong the terror of death.

"He was bleeding like a stuck pig, but I did not think he would die at once, although in truth, it was of no

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great concern to me. The one who was my concern, the one I had followed into this place — of her there was no trace.

"I left him there on the floor and ran back up the trail to the village at a pace that nearly burst my lungs. Either Kathe Maria would be there, or I would stop and pick up a few supplies, before going out into the canyons to hunt for her. When I reached Plaza de Telcolotes, light was pouring out of open doorways, and it was buzzing like a hive of wild bees.

"I pushed through a cluster of men with lanterns who were standing in front of Garcia's stable. There, sitting on a stump, was Auntie Hipolita, surrounded by fluttering women. The poor old woman seemed about to faint. She saw me from beneath lowered lids, and weakly stretched out her arms to me.

"'Oh, *bijito*, it was terrible. Terrible, terrible — oh, that an old woman like me should live so long, only to see such a terrible thing!' She clutched at me with hands like strong little claws.

"I was in great confusion, and I begged her to tell me what had happened. She told me that she had risen in the night, unable to sleep, and, hearing a noise in the stable, had come out to look for the cause. She had nearly been trampled as the tall horse, bearing a huge, dark rider, had broken out of the stable and thundered away down the trail. I gasped, and turned to the men.

"'It must be the same person who attacked Delberto Arellano!' I told them.

"They demanded to know how I had any knowledge of him, and I admitted that I had folowed the 'wedding party' home, because of my fears for Kathe Maria. I described what I had found to them — leaving out the part about the shaking of the house and the rush of air, because I was afraid they would think I was crazy.

"A bony hand clamped onto my shoulder. 'And what of the girl?' It was Magdalena, her mouth drawn into a slit like a knife blade.

I squirmed, and then blurted, 'She is gone — he has taken her, too!'

"There was a great uproar, with the men rushing around to get their guns, and the women weeping and begging them not to go out into the night.

"Magdalena was hissing in the back ground. 'You fools, it's the girl — the witch! She has attacked Arellano and stolen the horse to make her escape!'

"Auntie Hipolita lifted a feeble hand. 'No, no, Magdalena! I saw the one on the horse, and he was huge and dark, a big, black man! Certainly not a slip of a girl!'

"Magdalena snorted in derision, but the rest of the people, those who had not gone to join the hunt, gasped and muttered at the idea of the Big, Black Man. '*Esta el Diablo!*' they said one to another.

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"And so the men rode out to hunt, but I do not think that they looked very hard for either the Black Man or Kathe Maria. They were back before dawn, and Plaza de Tecolotes went back to living its life, the way it always had. The only differences were for Magdalena Garcia — who lost her servant and the gold of Delberto Arellano, who came grumbling up out of the canyon after it, as soon as he was scabbed over enough to walk — and to Bartolo Garcia, who soon learned exactly what it was like to live with the devil herself!"

Uncle Green-Eye grinned to himself and poked some more sticks into the fire.

"But Uncle," cried the youngest shepherd, "what happened? What happened to Kathe Maria?"

"Oh," said the old man, "she was never seen again, at least in our part of the world. Although I once heard, years later, a story about a beautiful young woman who had ridden alone into the city of Durango, and sought shelter with the good Sisters there. Because of her beauty and look of high birth, and her singing voice, which rang like crystal chimes, there were a number of young bucks who would have taken her to wed, but she chose to remain with the Sisters of Grace, and to enter the postulancy of that order."

"And was it her?" said the one with the buckteeth. "Was it Kathe Maria, trying to make amends for having called upon her father's powers within her, to escape old Arellano?"

The old man pursed his lips piously. "I told you, many strange things happened in and around the *Valle de los Gentes* when I was young. Who knows what power that young girl may have called upon in her desperation?"

"She *was* a shapeshifter, then," exclaimed the brash young man, his mustaches bristling with excitement.

The old man looked at him sternly. "Do not be so quick to judge, where God alone knows the truth of the matter."

The brash young man dropped his eyes. "Yes, Uncle."

The old man poked the fire and watched the sparks climb into the dark sky. The boys were sleeping soundly, wrapped in their blankets against the chill of the night, and the flock lay in dreamless peace, punctuated only by the occasional clink of the leader's bell. Uncle Green-Eye stretched out his hands to the fire again, and looked at the knotted strength beneath the dark skin and at the thick, ragged nails. He remembered.

When I watched them drag you from the house, my little bird, that foul old man and those two bloodsuckers, it felt as though fire were running through my body — or perhaps it was ice, pumping out from my

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heart to make my vision that much clearer, my strength that much greater, my rage pure and perfect. I waited until you were out of sight down the hill, and stole into the house to find Auntie Hipolita. She was sitting on the bench by the fire, not lying on a pallet as I had expected. When I spoke her name, she turned to me and I saw the great bruise on her face.

She smiled at me in a lopsided way and said, "It looks worse that it is, hijito. *The wound that hurts is here." She laid a hand on her sunken chest, and tears began to run into the lined channels of her cheeks. "Our poor little beauty . . . how will she bear it?"*

I knelt at her feet. "Auntie, are you strong enough to saddle the tall horse, and to load his saddlebags with enough supplies for a long journey?"

Her eyes began to gleam. "Of course, hijito, *do you think a sniveler like Magdalena could hit hard enough to hurt a tough old bird like me?"*

Quickly, desperately, we made our plans. I left her to carry out her part and ran down the trail into Weeping Woman Canyon.

When I saw the lantern bobbing in the distance, I ducked off the trail and under a low-spreading piñon. The Garcias were on their way back up the hill, having escorted the "groom" and his prisoner to the house. As they walked by, I tasted metal at the back of my throat, and all the muscles of my back and arms shivered, but there was other business at hand.

The boy crouched in the shadows. He wrapped his arms tightly around his knees and lowered his head, rolling into a fetal ball. Deep in his chest he began to intone a wordless chant. As he chanted, pictures flashed through his mind, . . . the winter camp of the People, the face of the Old One who had found him half-dead in the snow and had taken him with him. . . . Home, home to his own People. The boy had already reached the Warm Place, under the ground, and he had fought the Old One who was bringing him back, but the Old One was stronger and wiser. He pulled the boy back, back up into the world of time and sunlight, for he knew the boy as kin, and as one with a warrior's task yet to perform. When the boy was strong again, before he had departed, the Old One gave him the rest of the gift whose seed already sang in his blood. The Old One could not see the need clearly, but he knew it would come, and so he gave to the boy, blessed him, and sent him back.

Now the boy knew that the time had come. The chant thundered in his ears, a thousand voices strong, as he rose and stretched out his arms.

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He turned and began to run down the trail. He could not tell when the running became swooping flight, when the change began, the stretching of the arms and fingers, the remolding of the face and eyes, and most of all, the splendid, curving growing of feet and toes, thinning, separating the great blades hooking into the black air.

The fiery lamps of his eyes observed the house, daylight-bright. He landed on the flat roof, the boom of his wings resounding in his own tufted ears. He rested for a moment, turning his head this way and that to monitor the night.

A wail of disgust and despair arrowed into the darkness from a high, open window. The huge raptor launched himself into the inky air, drifting soundlessly as a falling leaf down to the window. Fastening his talons in the wood of the sill and giving an eel-like wriggle, he forced himself through the small aperture.

The girl stared at him over the old man's shoulder; there was no change in her frozen look of terror and revulsion. The creature's appearance was only one more manifestation of the web of horrors wrapped around her. She clutched the torn front of her dress together, backing away from the old man.

Arellano advanced toward her, holding out the white gown in a pacifying manner. He shook it out before him by its lacy bodice, grinning at her with blackened stumps of teeth and crooning persuasions. The light of the dozen black candles began to dance and flicker feverishly with the thrumming in the air caused by the movement of great wings. Too late, the old man, catching the direction of her stare, turned to find the immense owl upon him.

He flung the lengths of lace-and-satin at the gigantic bird of prey. Its talons caught in the lace, and it dragged the shining folds with it as it struck at the man's head. The billowing weight bore the man to the floor, and the owl, locking its claws into his chest, began to toy with him as if he were a mouse.

The man lay paralyzed. With a peculiar and un-owl-like deliberation, the bird began to daintily draw the razor-edge of the talon across his face, delicately scoring and rescoring the skin, passing close enough to an eye to nick a lid, not close enough to blind. It lowered its cruel, hooked bill to his throat and, chuckling softly to itself, draw a bloody line across the quivering flesh. All the while, the fiery wheels of its eyes burned into the eyes of Delberto Arellano, mocking, pitiless pools of magma scorching his unclean soul with visions of retribution.

Outside the high window, the black airs of the canyon purled and muttered.

The girl rose slowly to her feet where she had fallen, watching the

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bird at its careful savagery. She took a hesitant step toward it and its moaning, senseless prey. The owl lifted its head and looked at her with sulfurous eyes, one of the hot gold, and the other molten silver-green. She fell to her knees and extended a trembling hand.

"Oh no, *manito,* not for me! Do not kill him!"

She looked deeply into the hell-lit eyes, seeking the hidden soul. At last the blaze began to dim. She touched the back of the great head tenderly, and it inclined gently beneath her fingers, dipping the blood-painted hook of the bill, fluffing the gore-dappled feathers.

She rose and moved toward the door. "I will wait for you outside, little brother."

My Kathe Maria, you were shaking with the chill of the night and its terrors when Auntie Hipolita wrapped her shawl around you, but you put your foot in the stirrup and swung up on the tall horse like a warrior, and your work-hardened little hand held him well as he danced with excitement and impatience. You did not hesitate to ride off into the dark, following the directions I gave you, and you were there, waiting for me, on the bank of the River of Souls in the white light of midday.

I saw you last in Santa Fe, as you stepped through the gate into the arms of the Sisters. When I returned to Plaza de Tecolotes, *who should know or care what an ugly little half-breed had been doing, out on a wild-goose chase after a useless, tainted girl?*

Only Magdalena sometimes looked at me, with a black, puzzled look, as if she were fishing for dark suspicions in the murky depths of her mind. Almost as if she could see, burning on my cheek, the brand of your kiss, my Kathe Maria.

Coming soon

Next month: "Cage 37" is a gripping SF alternate worlds adventure by **Wayne Wightman**; you won't want to miss it. Also, stories by **Alan Dean Foster, Felix Gotschalk** and others.

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Doug Hornig is a Virginian who writes poetry, nonfiction and novels, as well as short stories that have been featured in such magazines as Islands *and* Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. *He writes, "My first novel,* Foul Shot, *published by Scribner's, was nominated for an Edgar Award for Best First Mystery of 1984." His second novel,* Hardball, *appeared in 1985, also from Scribner's. "The Game of Magical Death," his first story for* F&SF, *is a gripping tale of the dark side of a computer game.*

The Game of Magical Death

BY

DOUG HORNIG

"I don't want to eat my salad," Billy Sampson said. "I don't like salad. Besides, I've got a lot to do. May I be excused, please?"

His parents were so out of it. They didn't know a CPU from a BMW. It was useless talking to them. In the electronic age, they were dinosaurs.

"Billy," his mother said, "we don't care what kind of fancy computer program you have to write tonight. If you don't get enough vitamins, you won't be able to write your own name. Now eat."

He pushed the salad around his plate. A bunch of soggy vegetables. There was no point in attempting to explain that when you were the first kid to get a new game, you had to try it out right away. That there were matters of status involved. Not to mention the excitement of the unknown. The only thing to do was humor them. Somehow he got down most of the salad, nearly gagging in the process.

"Now may I be excused, please?"

"Don't you want any dessert, Billy?"

"Maybe later."

"All right. Try to get to bed at a decent hour, will you?"

Billy went quickly to his room and shut the door. That was one thing his parents were good about. They respected his privacy. If his door was closed, they wouldn't disturb him unless he invited them in.

His IBM Personal Computer sat on the desk, inert, mere potential. It wasn't the best micro on the market; in fact, considering what you got for the money, it was one of the worst. Still, because of the I-B-M on the nameplate, it was clobbering the competition. More new stuff was being

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written for its operating system than for any other. That's why he'd traded up and gotten one. Some of his friends in the local hacker network had done the same. Others had decided to hold on to their Apples and CP/M machines for a while. That way, the group as a whole covered the field.

Carefully, lovingly, he removed the new floppy disk from its protective sleeve. It had come into his possession by pure chance, so he was sure none of the other guys had it yet. He'd been reading *ComputerWorld,* as he did every week, and had idly glanced at the Employment section, something he rarely did. There he'd found a tiny box ad that someone had presumably placed in that section by mistake. It read: "THE GAME OF MAGICAL DEATH, for IBM PC and compatibles, NEW from Personal Computer Odysseys, Homer, AK 99603, $59.95." Billy Simpson had never heard of Homer, Alaska, much less of Personal Computer Odysseys. That wasn't surprising. The new companies came and went faster than you could keep track of them. Now here was one with a brand-new game. It was a bit pricey, but if he scooped the gang, it'd be worth it. Billy had sent off his check the same afternoon.

The game arrived in five days. Peculiar. How long did it take the mail to get to Alaska and back, anyway? Certainly more than five days. And then there was the three-line printed note that was packed with the floppy: "Personal Computer Odysseys, Prompt Personalized Service Our Specialty, Thank You For The Anticipated Order." Whatever that meant.

But Billy didn't like to dwell on things over which he had no control. If it was a strange company, so what? There were a lot of strange people in the field. The thing that mattered was the quality of the product. He slotted MS-DOS into one of the PC's drives and booted up. Then he loaded his new game.

GOOD DAY, MR. SAMPSON. the screen said. DO YOU WISH TO PLAY THE GAME OF MAGICAL DEATH? IF SO, HIT "RETURN."

It knows my name, eh? Now *that's* personalized service.

He pressed the "Return" key. The next screen appeared.

SELECT LEVEL OF PLAY.
LEVEL 1: RANDOM DEATH
LEVEL 2: MULTIPLE DEATH
LEVEL 3: INTERPERSONAL DEATH
LEVEL 4: CREATOR DEATH
LEVEL 5: PERSONAL DEATH
ABORT

Great. A decent game had to have levels of play. The working assumption was that the lower levels would be too easy for him. Billy excelled at games. He always started at a higher level than anyone else. He was the best. So he entered a "5." Bypass the kid stuff.

ACCESS DENIED.

Nervy of it. Oh well. He tried a "4," then a "3" and a "2." Same result in each case. Finally he settled for a "1."

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RANDOM DEATH. YOUR OPPONENT IS:

There was a ten-second pause before the name "JEFFREY HIGHPORT" appeared. Then, SELECT THREE WEAPONS, followed by a menu of about two dozen choices.

Billy was going to like this game. There was no accompanying instructional booklet. Therefore he had no idea of how the weapons had to be used or what his opponent was armed with. That was a neat touch. He'd have to feel his way along, learn by doing.

He selected "Impenetrable Umbrella," "Evasive Action," and "Heat-Sensitive Laser." One offensive weapon, one defensive, one that could go either way. A good mix.

OPPONENT HAS INGESTED A MIND-ALTERING CHEMICAL THAT GIVES GREAT DETERMINATION BUT DIMINISHED MOTOR ABILITY. HIS VEHICLE IS PURSUING AT A HIGH RATE OF SPEED AND WILL IMPACT YOU IN X SECONDS. YOUR RESPONSE:

An elementary trap, unworthy of Billy's abilities. The Umbrella would be something they'd let him use only once, otherwise he could hide behind it indefinitely and the game would stalemate. If he activated it too early, his opponent would likely just go around it and his defenses would be seriously compromised. The trick would be to set the Umbrella at a time when the pursuing vehicle's momentum would carry it to destruction. For now, just slow it up.

He typed: "Heat-Sensitive Laser."

X = 30. VEHICLE PARTIALLY DISABLED, IMPACT IN X SECONDS. SINGLE-TRAJECTORY MISSILE LAUNCHED. YOUR RESPONSE:

So far, so good: 30 seconds would have been plenty of time to avoid the Umbrella. He'd scored a hit with the laser, and his opponent's coordination was impaired because of the drug. Assuming they'd started with roughly equal weaponry, it was time to seize the advantage.

"None."

X = 35. MISSILE WIDE OF TARGET. VEHICLE SELF-REPAIRING. IMPACT IN X SECONDS. YOUR RESPONSE:

Billy had him now. The self-repair feature would have been a defensive weapon. The guy would probably have only one more. It was time to suck him in for the kill.

"Evasive Action."

X = 10. VEHICLE IGNITING AFTERBURNER. IMPACT IN X SECONDS. YOUR RESPONSE:

Since there was no way of telling whether they were operating on clock time, Billy punched in his response immediately.

"Impenetrable Umbrella."

X = 3. IMPACT. VEHICLE DESTROYED. OPPONENT NEUTRALIZED. YOU WIN, BILLY SAMPSON.

And then the screen went blank. No return to the original menu, no further instructions, nothing. Billy tried every technique he could think of, but was unable to coax a response from the machine. He even turned the PC off and started from scratch. Still nothing.

What the hell? This wasn't fair. It

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was an interesting game, sure. But he hadn't paid $59.95 for something that conked out at Level 1. By the time he went to bed. Billy had composed in his mind a very nasty letter to the people at Personal Computer Odysseys.

The second floppy arrived the following day. It was waiting when he got home from school.

So the game was played on sequential diskettes. Very interesting. Perhaps the last one would reactivate the first, so that someone else could play. That would be O.K.

He put the game away. He'd play it later. Build up his anticipation first.

After dinner his father said, "Billy, can I talk to you seriously for a couple of minutes?"

"Sure, Dad."

Here it came again. How he was wasting his time with that silly computer, how his schoolwork was suffering, etc. He'd learned to let it in one ear and out the other without really listening.

They settled themselves in the living room.

"Now Son," his father began, "in a couple of months, you'll be getting your driver's license. I guess you know what a responsibility that's going to be."

"I sure do, Dad." This didn't look so bad after all.

"Billy, I don't know if you drink. Do you drink, Son?"

"I have a beer now and then. You know, with the guys."

"Well, thank you for being honest. I don't condemn it, of course. I like the occasional cocktail myself, as you will have observed. But there's one thing I'd like you to promise me."

"What's that, Dad?"

"Your mother and I have talked it over. We'd like you to promise that, after you get your license, if you've ever had one beer too many, you'll call us. And we'll come bring you home. It doesn't matter what time it is. Just call before you drive. We'd rather you got us out of bed than take the chance of . . . well, of something like this."

Billy's father handed him the afternoon paper. On the front page was a three-column photo. The crumpled remains of an unidentifiable car.

"Such a young fella, too," Billy's father said. "Just a year older than yourself. Will you promise us, Son?"

"Sure, Dad. No problem." He didn't drink that much, anyway.

"Thank you. We appreciate it."

Billy gave the story accompanying the photo a quick scan: "Jeffrey Highport, 17, of Crozet, was killed yesterday evening when he lost control of his vehicle and struck a concrete bridge abutment on Interstate 64. Police said the youth was returning home from a party in Charlottesville at which there had been some drinking, although it was not immediately . . ."

Then he stopped and looked again

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at the name. He stared at it. Jeffrey Highport.

Very slowly, he set the newspaper down on the sofa. His mouth was suddenly dry. He ran his tongue over his lips.

"What is it, Son?" his father asked.

"Uh, that's a terrible story, Dad. You won't have to worry about that with me. No, uh, not me."

Billy got up, went to his room, and closed the door.

No.

It was a coincidence. It had to be. There was no way . . .

For an hour he sat on his bed, turning the new floppy disk over and over in his hand, wondering what to do. It was a coincidence. Those kinds of things happened all the time. Guy goes fishing, catches a big bass, opens it up, and there's the wedding ring he dropped in the lake twenty years earlier. It happens.

No, it doesn't. Not like this. There was only one explanation. Billy Sampson had somehow caused the death of a local teenager he'd never even met. It was insane, but there it was. Jeffrey was indisputably dead.

He thought about it some more, slowly realized that he was wrong. There was another possibility. That was that Jeffrey had always been going to die. He had always been going to be drinking, his car had always been going to crash, on that specific day. And what the game had done was to open a window somewhere that gave Billy a fleeting glimpse of the future.

In that case he bore no responsibility. Except to try to use what he had discovered for some positive purpose.

There was only one thing to do, of course, despite all of the agonizing. Not one person in a thousand would have done any differently. He booted up the PC and activated the new diskette.

WELCOME BACK, MR. SAMPSON. DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE THE GAME OF MAGICAL DEATH?

He hit "Return."

The familiar menu appeared. Billy felt that he now understood the rules, but he tried "1," "3," "4," and "5" anyway. Unsurprisingly, access was denied. The game was consistent. He entered a "2."

MULTIPLE DEATH. YOUR OPPONENTS ARE:

Pause.

ROBERT ARCHER, BELINDA ARCHER, SALLY ARCHER, COOKIE ARCHER. SELECT FOUR WEAPONS.

The menu was entirely different this round. Billy examined it, searching for a pattern. The first time, he'd selected casually and had won with his play. As he moved to higher levels, the game was apt to be less forgiving. He'd need more than proper timing; appropriate firepower would be essential.

He made his choice.

OPPONENTS ARE BARRICADED IN FORTRESS PREPARING POISON GAS. GAS IS IRRE-

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SISTIBLE WHEN COMPLETED. YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES. YOUR RESPONSE:

This time he was expected to make the first move. He thought about it. After ten minutes he decided that they'd figure him to be setting up a diversion. So he fired his best shot first.

"Fire Arrow."

OPPONENT FAILED TO RAISE PROTECTIVE SHUTTERS IN TIME. FORTRESS ON FIRE. SPRINKLERS ACTIVATED. YOUR RESPONSE:

"Horse."

OPPONENT ATTACK WITH CROSSBOW INEFFECTIVE. POISON GAS EXPLOSION BEFORE FIRE EXTINGUISHED. FORTRESS DESTROYED. YOUR RESPONSE:

That should have been it. The gas had blown up, he was at a safe distance, it ought to be over. What was wrong?

Of course. He typed quickly.

"Armor."

Assuming the gas itself wasn't counted, the opponents had used three of their four weapons. Leaving them one. That wouldn't matter unless there was someone to use it.

SURVIVING ARCHER'S SPEAR NEUTRALIZED BY ARMOR. YOUR RESPONSE:

"Hand Ax."

ALL OPPONENTS NEUTRALIZED. YOU WIN, BILLY SAMPSON.

The screen went blank. This time, Billy didn't attempt to revive it. He went to bed, where he tossed and turned, succumbing to nightmares whenever he drifted off.

• • •

The third diskette showed up on Saturday. Billy had spent the previous two days in bed in his room, dreading its arrival. He'd gone home sick from school the day he heard about the Archer family. They had lived in the Belmont section of town, Robert and Belinda and their two daughters. Robert worked for the phone company. The night Billy was playing Level 2 of the game, the gas main in the Archer's house ruptured. Enough gas eventually accumulated that the stove's pilot light ignited it. Three members of the family burned to death in their home. The fourth, Sally, was the older sister, and her bedroom was farthest from the site of the explosion. She jumped from her second-story window before the flames got to her. When she landed, she pitched forward and hit her head on a stone. The blow split her skull and killed her.

At seven in the evening, Billy's father came into his room.

"Son," he said, "I know how poorly you've been feeling, but do you think you could get along without your mother and me for a couple of hours? There's this durn cocktail party. At David's, over on High Street. And, well, it's important to the business that we be there. Think you'll be O.K.?"

"Sure, Dad."

"Thanks. I'll make it up to you."

In truth, Billy wasn't unhappy that his parents were going out. He couldn't tell them what was happen-

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ing. They'd immediately phone the university clinic and make an appointment with the head of Psychiatry. Despite being sick with fear, Billy knew that he would proceed to Level 3. It was probably best done alone.

WE MEET AGAIN, MR. SAMPSON, the screen said this time. ARE YOU SURE YOU WISH TO CONTINUE WITH THE GAME OF MAGICAL DEATH?

Billy hesitated, but only for a moment, before firmly striking the "Return" key. Then he entered "3." This time there was no pause by the machine.

INTERPERSONAL DEATH. YOU ARE DEFENDING: MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM SAMPSON. SELECT TWO WEAPONS.

Oh God. They'd changed the rules on him. And he could make only two choices out of twenty-four.

The sweat ran off him. Was he in real time and was the clock running? He couldn't guess. He studied the menu, his brain a maze of rapidly shifting deductive-logic circuits.

Then he had it. It was simple. This time he had one big advantage. He *knew where his parents were.* Given that, there weren't but so many possibilities. Or were there? Car wreck, poisoned canapés, acts of God? No. He'd stick with his original conclusion. He chose.

DEFENDANTS ARE ACCOSTED BY GANG OF STREET TOUGHS ARMED WITH KNIVES. YOUR RESPONSE:

Piece of cake. The game was forcing him to make the initial response for the second time in a row, but he'd anticipated that as well as the nature of the threat. One weapon was all he really needed. He typed the words without hesitation.

"Black and white."

STREET TOUGHS DISPERSED BY POLICE CRUISER. DEFENDANTS UNHARMED. YOU WIN, BILLY SAMPSON.

Blank screen.

Billy chucked the diskette into the wastebasket. He was finished being sick, too. He was on top of things now. The best.

Half an hour later he had to endure his parents' recounting of their harrowing experience. He feigned wide-eyed interest and profound relief that they'd come through it all unscathed. That night he slept like the dead.

The fourth diskette came with the next mail. Billy was ready for it. The game was a challenge once again. He raced through dinner, even eating his salad, then hurried to his room.

"My son, the computer genius," Billy's father said sarcastically to his mother. "No time for us common folk."

But by then Billy was staring at the latest screen.

DO YOU WISH TO ENGAGE ME IN THE GAME OF MAGICAL DEATH, MR. SAMPSON?

He hit "Return," then spent a long time contemplating the Level menu. Level 4 was "Creator Death." What

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did that mean? Surely he wasn't gaming with God. The Creator of the game, then? That must be it. The message *had* said: "Do you wish to engage *me* . . ."

And what could the outcome be? His own life wouldn't be on the line; Personal Death was Level 5. If it was the Creator's life, what would happen if that were lost? Was it the end of the game?

Billy considered typing in "Abort." But he just wasn't sure what would happen then. It might mean that he'd never be allowed to play again. And in spite of everything, he didn't want the game to end. He punched "4."

CREATOR DEATH. SELECT 6 WEAPONS.

That was it. No indication of who was fighting whom for what. The menu was the usual length, but six selections meant that some very complex action sequences were possible. Billy chose carefully, hoping to mislead the game as to his intentions. When he finished, the machine typed, YOUR RESPONSE:

All right, that was fair. If the Creator was indeed fighting for its life, it deserved to be able to maximize its chances. So it was making the first move, but demanding that Billy respond before he knew what that move was.

Billy reasoned that in his first move at the two previous levels, he'd taken his best shot. The game might thus reason that he'd try to trick it by doing that a third time. But then it would reason that he knew that and would keep his good stuff in reserve. Finally, at this level of complexity, it would have to assume that Billy would double back once more and end up where he'd started, taking the big step after all. Primary defense would thus be activated at once. So Billy used one of his lesser weapons.

"Air Strike."

AIRCRAFT DESTROYED BY HEAT-SEEKING MISSILES. YOUR RESPONSE:

He'd been wrong. The game had precisely anticipated his first move, using neither more nor less than it needed to counter. It would now attack, thinking that Billy wouldn't expect so logical a move.

"Land Mines."

ASSAULT TANKS LOST IN MINEFIELD. YOUR RESPONSE:

They were neck and neck. This was the moment, Billy knew. He knew it suddenly and with perfect clarity. He *knew* that the game was going to make a secondary move of some kind. It was time to blast away. He passed up "Indestructible Shield" and typed: "10-Megaton Thermonuclear Device."

ELECTROMAGNETIC SCATTERING INSUFFICIENT DETERRENT TO THERMONUCLEAR BOMB. COMMAND HQ DESTROYED. YOU WIN, BILLY SAMPSON. THANK YOU FOR PLAYING THE GAME. GOOD-BYE. AND GOOD LUCK.

Once again the blank screen.

He'd done it.

• • •

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The story was on the front page of the afternoon paper. An earthquake had rocked Alaska's Kenai Peninsula. A savage one. Homer had been particularly hard hit. Much of it was now rubble. There was no telling how many lives had been lost, or what the true extent of property damage was.

Billy was stunned. He knew without doubt who one of the casualties was. The Creator had been playing for keeps.

Yet, even more surprising was the arrival of the fifth diskette in the afternoon mail. Billy hadn't expected that. He'd thought that if the Creator lost at Level 4, there would never be a Level 5.

Now he was looking at the Level menu. It had come up without an opening message. It was either "5" or "Abort." There were no other choices left.

"Personal Death." What did that mean? His death? Or the death of some unknown number of persons. How would the battle be fought? If he won, was there a reward? There must be. The stakes were too high to think otherwise. What could be worth his life? The permanent gift of future sight? The screen offered no help.

His finger hovered over the keyboard. Life or death? Life *and* death? Whose? It dropped onto the "5."

The message came up.

AN INCURABLE PLAGUE THREATENS ALL HUMAN LIFE ON THE PLANET, NO TREATMENT POSSIBLE. The message faded. EITHER "A" OR "B" NEUTRALIZES THE THREAT AND SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETES THE GAME. Fade. ENTER "A" OR "B" TO TERMINATE THE GAME. YOUR RESPONSE:

A fifty-fifty chance. No clues.

Billy Sampson began to scream. He screamed and screamed and could not stop. He stared at the message and screamed.

Billy's father rushed into the room, grabbed Billy around the shoulders, shook him.

"Son," he said, "what is it? What *is* it?"

Billy continued to scream.

Billy's father looked at the computer screen.

"Oh, for God's sake," he said, and punched "A."

Along the Carenage, in the city of St. George's, Grenada, an island nation occupied by foreign powers, the first child, a girl, age seven, went into convulsions.

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THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING PLANET

A few weeks ago, I received a phone call from a young woman who said she was putting together some sort of article for some sort of magazine. (I don't suppose she was actually a writer, since all she was doing was calling various celebrities in order to ask them a question. She was then going to put all the answers together and have the result appear in print. It doesn't take much writing ability to do that.)

I said, cautiously, "What is the question?"

"Well," she said, vivaciously, "What is your favorite bar and why is it your favorite? Is it because of the quality of its drinks, its ambiance, its inaccessibility, the people you find there, or what?"

"My favorite bar?" I said, astonished. "You mean a bar where people go to drink?"

"Yes. Of all the bars you've visited —"

"But I don't visit any, miss. I do not drink. I never have. I don't suppose I ever enter any bar except to pass through it on my way to a dining area."

There was a pause, and then the caller said. "Aren't you Isaac Asimov, the writer?"

"Yes, I am."

"And aren't you the one who's written about 350 books?"

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"Yes, I have; but I've written every single one of them while stone cold sober."

"You have? But I thought all writers drank." (I think she was being polite at this point. I think that what she really meant to say was that she thought all writers were alcoholics.)

I said, rather stiffly, I suppose, "I can't speak for anyone else, but I don't drink."

"Well, that's certainly strange," muttered the caller, and hung up the phone.

Frankly, I think it did my caller a great deal of good to experience something strange. We should each of us be subject to such a stirring up for the sake of our mental health, and scientists, of course, are fortunate enough to experience it all the time. Take the case, for instance, of the planet, Pluto —

Throughout the first third of this century, the search was on for a "Planet X," one with an orbit beyond that of Neptune. Those astronomers who searched for it expected to find a gas giant — that is, a planet that was larger than the Earth, but was low in density because it was made up largely of hydrogen, helium, neon and the hydrogen-containing "ices," water, ammonia, and methane. After all, the four outermost planets, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, were all gas giants, so why shouldn't the planet beyond Neptune be one?

Naturally, astronomers expected that Planet X would be smaller than the known gas giants because it was farther out from the Sun. The farther out, the thinner and more tenuous the pre-planetary nebula would have been, and the smaller the planet that would have formed. Even so, Planet X was expected to be substantially larger than Earth.

After all, the mass of Jupiter, the largest gas giant and the nearest to the Sun, is 318 times that of Earth. Saturn, the next farther out, has a mass 95 times that of Earth. Beyond those two giants are Uranus and Neptune, which have masses 15 and 17 times that of Earth, respectively.

The American astronomer Percival Lowell (1855-1916), the most assiduous of the searchers, therefore guessed that Planet X would continue the downward trend and might have a mass only 6.6 times that of Earth. Still, no one would have been surprised if it had proved to be as much as 10 times the mass of the Earth.

Moreover, it was not necessary to reason the mass entirely by analogy. There was a stronger argument. The reason why Planet X was

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thought to exist was because of slight anomalies in the orbit of Uranus (see DISCOVERY BY BLINK, January 1977). That meant that astronomers were looking for a planet massive enough to affect Uranus's orbit measurably even though such a planet might well be two or three billion kilometers beyond Uranus. Having Planet X ten times the mass of the Earth would make it none too large for the job.

Planet X was finally discovered in 1930 by the American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh, who called it Pluto, partly because the first two letters were the initials of Percival Lowell. It was discovered fairly near the place where it should have been if it were indeed affecting Uranus's orbit, and that, too, was a point in favor of the suggestion that it ought to be a gas giant.

The very instant of discovery, however, produced a nasty shock, the first of a number that Pluto would provide over the next half-century.

You see, Neptune is an eighth-magnitude object. That makes it too dim to see with the unaided eye, but that is to be expected, considering that it is about 4500 million kilometers (2800 million miles) from the Sun and that its reflection of the dim sunshine it receives must then travel that distance again to reach us.

Pluto, allowing for its greater distance and its presumably smaller size, should naturally have been substantially dimmer than Neptune. Astronomers expected Pluto to have a magnitude of perhaps 10.

But that was not so. Pluto was of the 14th magnitude. It was almost forty times dimmer than it was expected to be.

There were three possible reasons for this: 1) Pluto was considerably more distant than expected, 2) Pluto was made of considerably darker materials than expected, 3) Pluto was considerably smaller than expected. Or, of course, there could be any combination of these three possibilities.

The distance was fairly easy to determine. From Pluto's shift in apparent position from day to day, one could get a rough notion pretty quickly as to the time it would take to move about the Sun. From this orbital period, it was at once possible to calculate its average distance from the Sun.

As it has turned out, it takes Pluto 247.7 years to go around its orbit once, and its average distance from the Sun is about 5900 million kilometers (3670 million miles). It is, on the average, then, about 1-1/3 times as far from the Sun as Neptune is.

This makes Pluto the most distant of the known planets, to be sure,

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but it does not place it so far off that one might account for its dimness as a result of distance alone. It follows that Pluto must be made of darker materials than the four gas giants are, or that it is considerably smaller than they are, or both.

Whether one or the other or both, Pluto is *not* a gas giant. For one thing, a gas giant (or any planet with an atmosphere dense enough to produce heavy clouds) reflects about half the sunlight that falls upon it. Its "albedo," in other words, is in the neighborhood of 0.5. The same is true of a planet even without an atmosphere, if it has an icy surface (one consisting of frozen water, ammonia, methane, or any combination of these). A planet without an atmosphere and consisting of bare rock would have an albedo of about 0.07.

To account for Pluto's dimness, there was a strong tendency to suppose that it might be composed of rocky material and might not have an atmosphere. Even so, its mass could not be much greater than that of Earth if it were to be as dim as it was.

So, pretty soon, the astronomers began to divide the nine major planets of the Solar system into four gas giants, or "Jovian planets," and five small, rocky worlds, or "Terrestrial planets." The Terrestrial planets were Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars *and* Pluto.

What a Terrestrial planet was doing way out there at the outer edge of the planetary system, when all the others hugged the Sun, could not be explained, but it was necessary to classify Pluto as such to allow for its dimness.

Still, even though Pluto had shrunk in size drastically at the moment of its discovery, it might still be the fifth largest planetary object in the Solar system, after the four gas giants, *if* it were slightly larger than Earth.

But is Pluto the size of Earth? In some ways, it bears the stigmata of what might be considered a very small planet.

Thus, the orbits of the planets are not, on the whole, very elliptical. The eccentricities of most of the planets are 0.05 or less. The eccentricity of Earth's orbit, for instance, is 0.017. This means that, to the unaided eye, most planetary orbits look just about circular.

The exceptions are the two smallest planets. Mars, with a mass only a tenth that of Earth, has an eccentricity of nearly 0.1. Mercury, with a mass only about a twentieth of the Earth (half that of Mars), has an eccentricity of 0.2.

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If we are going to associate low mass with high eccentricity, what do we do about Pluto? As its motion across the sky was studied for longer and longer periods, the details of its orbit were worked out, and the orbital eccentricity was found to be 0.25, higher than that of Mercury, and, in fact, the highest of any of the nine planets.

Does that mean that Pluto is even less massive than Mercury? Not necessarily. There is no *compelling* reason to associate low mass with high eccentricity. Thus, Neptune has little more than a twentieth the mass of Jupiter, and yet Neptune's orbital eccentricity is not greater than that of Jupiter, but is considerably less, only about a fifth that of Jupiter, in fact. Therefore, Pluto's high eccentricity may not, in itself, be a sufficient argument in favor of its being a very small planet — but it does give one to think.

The high eccentricity of Pluto's orbit means, by the way, that its distance from the Sun varies enormously in the course of its passage about that body. At its closest ("perihelion"), Pluto is 4,425 million kilometers (2,750 million miles) from the Sun. At the other end of its orbit, which it reaches a century and a quarter after perihelion, when it is farthest ("aphelion") it is 7,375 million kilometers (4,583 million miles) from the Sun. This is a difference of 2,950 million kilometers (1,833 million miles).

This would make little difference to an exploring party on Pluto, of course. The Sun would be nothing more than a very bright star in Pluto's sky, and if it were a bit dimmer at aphelion than at perihelion, probably no one but the expeditionary astronomer would either know or care.

Its orbital eccentricity places Pluto, at times, a bit closer to the Sun than Neptune ever gets. At Neptune's perihelion, it is 4458 million kilometers (2771 million miles) from the Sun, while Pluto, at perihelion, gets 33 million kilometers (20.5 million miles) closer.

As it happens, in 1979, Pluto, approaching its perihelion, moved closer to the Sun than Neptune, and Pluto ceased to be the farthest planet for a time. In each of Pluto's trips about the Sun, it remains closer than Neptune for a twenty-year interval. This time, Pluto will reach its perihelion in 1989 and move out farther than Neptune again in 1999. It will not repeat this curious procedure until the years 2227 to 2247.

Another aspect of a planetary orbit is its "inclination," the amount by which it is tipped to the plane of Earth's orbit. Generally, the inclination of the planets is small. They circle in so nearly the same plane that if you make a small enough three-dimensional representation of the plan-

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etary system as far out as Neptune, it would all fit comfortably into one of those boxes that holds pizzas.

Once more, the smallest planet is a bit of an exception. While inclinations are usually 3 degrees or less, Mercury's is 7 degrees. If a high orbital inclination implies a small mass, what are we to make of Pluto's orbit, which has an inclination of some 17 degrees? Still, Uranus is considerably less massive than Saturn, yet Uranus also has a smaller inclination than Saturn has. We see, then, that inclination and mass don't have a necessary connection. Pluto's high inclination may not be significant, therefore — but again we are forced to think.

Pluto's high inclination means that although it seems to cross Neptune's orbit in a two-dimensional diagram of the planetary system, there is no chance at all of a collision between the two planets in the foreseeable future. Three-dimensionally, Pluto's high inclination carries it below Neptune's orbit so that the two planets are never separated by less than 1300 million kilometers (800 million miles) at those times when the orbits seem to cross. Indeed, Pluto can, at times, be a bit closer to Uranus than it ever gets to Neptune.

The dimness of Pluto, which tells us it is smaller than originally expected, also tells us something else, because its reflected light is not constant.

If Pluto is a rocky planet, it may be that different portions of its surface reflect light with different efficiencies. There may be lighter rocks in one place than in another, or some rocks are frost-covered and others aren't. If this is so, then as the planet turns, its brightness should vary a bit. On the whole, there should be an overall variation with a period equal to its rotation.

In 1954, a Canadian astronomer, Robert H. Hardie, and a co-worker, Merle Walker, measured the brightness very delicately and decided that Pluto rotates once every 6.4 days. (The best present-day figure is 6 days, 9 hours, and 18 minutes, or 6.39 days.)

This, too, puts Pluto's size in question. On the whole, it seems that the larger a planet is, the faster it rotates on its axis. Jupiter, the most massive planet, rotates in 9 hours 50 minutes; while Saturn, the second most massive, rotates in 10 hours, 14 minutes; and Uranus, the least massive of the gas giants, rotates in 17 hours, 15 minutes.

The Terrestrial planets, smaller than the gas giants, have longer rotational periods. Earth's is 24 hours, and the smaller orb of Mars rotates in

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24 hours, 37 minutes. Mercury and Venus rotate very slowly indeed, but the Sun's tidal influences have something to do with that.

Yet Pluto, which can't possibly experience perceptible tidal influences from the very distant Sun, has a rotational period of over six days, which seems to be the mark of a very small planet. Again, this may be a coincidence, but we now have three characteristics — orbital eccentricity, orbital inclination, and rotational period — all of which seem to mark Pluto as very small. How far can coincidence stretch?

What is needed is a direct measurement of Pluto's diameter, but how is that to be done? At Pluto's huge distance and rather small size, it looks like a mere dot of light even in a good telescope, even though it was fairly near perihelion at the time of discovery. (Had it been near aphelion, with its apparent diameter only 3/5 that at perihelion, the case would have been considerably more difficult.)

In 1950, however, the Dutch-American astronomer Gerard Peter Kuiper (1905-1973) tackled the task, making use of the then new 200-inch Palomar telescope. He turned it on Pluto and tried to estimate the width of the dot of light. It wasn't easy because the tiny orb of Pluto twinkles a bit, and magnifying its size by telescope also magnifies the twinkles. The best Kuiper could do was to estimate that its size was 0.23 seconds of arc. (By comparison, Neptune's orb is never seen as less than 2.2 seconds of arc. Pluto's apparent width, then, is about one-tenth that of Neptune.)

An apparent width of 0.23 seconds of arc, allowing for Pluto's distance, would mean that its diameter would be something like 6100 kilometers (3800 miles). This would make our incredible shrinking planet considerably smaller than Earth. It would make Pluto, indeed, somewhat smaller than Mars, which has a diameter of 6790 kilometers (4220 miles). Instead of being the fifth largest planetary body, Pluto would then be the eighth largest, with only Mercury, among the major planets, smaller.

Not everyone accepted Kuiper's figure. The method of determining Pluto's diameter by looking at it through a telescope was simply too uncertain. There is, however, another way.

Every once in a while, Pluto, as it moves slowly across the sky, passes near a dim star. If it happens to move directly in front of the star (an "occultation"), the star will wink out for a period of time. The time varies according to whether the star passes behind Pluto near one end of its orb or across its center. If we can get the exact position of the star

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and of the center of Pluto's orb, and if the minimum distance between the two can be determined and the time of the winking out of the star measured, then the diameter of Pluto can be worked out with pretty fair accuracy.

Of course it may be that Pluto might narrowly miss the star. In that case if one measured the distance between Pluto's center and the star, one can estimate the maximum diameter of Pluto, the one which would make it just possible to miss the star.

On April 28, 1965, Pluto was moving toward a dim star in the constellation of Leo. If Pluto were as large as the Earth, or even as large as Mars, it would occult the star, but it *missed.* From the fact that it missed, it could be calculated that the diameter of Pluto could not be more than 5790 kilometers (3600 miles) and might be substantially less.

So now it seemed that our incredible shrinking planet had to be no more than halfway between Mars and Mercury in size. Its mass could not be more than 1/16 that of Earth — and it might be less than that.

The problem was finally solved, quite unexpectedly, in June, 1978. The astronomer James Christie, working in Washington, D.C., was studying excellent photographs of Pluto taken by a 61-inch telescope in Arizona at high altitudes where the interfering influences of the atmosphere were much reduced.

Christie studied the photographs under strong magnification, and it seemed to him that there was a bump on Pluto. Could it be that the telescope had moved very slightly while the photograph was being taken? No, for in that case, all the stars in the field would have appeared as short lines; and they were all perfect points.

Christie looked at other photographs under magnification and they all had the bump. What's more, Christie noticed that the bump wasn't in the same place from picture to picture. In great excitement, Christie got still earlier photographs of Pluto, some as much as eight years old, and it became clear that the bump was moving about Pluto with a period of 6.4 days — Pluto's rotational period.

Either there was a huge mountain on Pluto, or else Pluto had a near-by satellite. Christie was sure it was a satellite, and this was definitely proved in 1980, when a French astronomer, Antoine Labeyrie, working on top of Mauna Kea in Hawaii, made use of the technique of speckle interferometry. This showed Pluto as a pattern of dots, but it produced two such patterns, a larger and a smaller, with no connection

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between them. Pluto definitely had a satellite.

Christie named the satellite Charon (KAY-ron) after the name of the ferry-boat pilot who, in the Greek myths, carried the shades of the dead across the River Styx into the underground kingdom of Pluto. (I would have chosen the name Persephone for the satellite, after the wife of Pluto, but Christie was apparently influenced by the fact that *his* wife was named Charlene.)

In 1980, Pluto passed close to another star. Pluto missed the star (at least as seen from Earth) but Charon passed in front of it, and this occultation was viewed from an observatory in South Africa by an astronomer named A. R. Walker. The star winked out for 50 seconds, which gave Charon a minimum diameter of 1170 kilometers (730 miles).

However, there was now a better way of determining size. Once you have a satellite, know its distance from the planet it circles, and the time it takes for one revolution, you can calculate the mass of the planet plus satellite. From the relative sizes of the planet and the satellite, assuming them to be of similar chemical composition, you can get the mass of each.

It turned out that Charon was 19,400 kilometers (12,000 miles) from Pluto. This is only 1/20 the distance of the Moon from the Earth, so it's no wonder that, at Pluto's distance from us, so close a satellite went unnoticed for nearly half a century.

The mass of Pluto was calculated to be about 0.0021 (1/500) the mass of the Earth, so that the incredible shrinking planet turned out to be less massive than Mercury. In fact, it is only a little over 1/6 the mass of our Moon. All the criteria that seemed to show that Pluto was a very small planet were correct, after all.

As for Charon, it is about one-tenth the mass of Pluto.

Now that we know how small Pluto is, we can no longer imagine that it is made of rock. Given its size, it would not reflect enough light from bare rock to be as bright as it is. It must be an icy body, which would make it of lower density and of larger size, and which would allow it to reflect more of the sunlight that falls upon it.

It is now estimated that Pluto is about 3000 kilometers (1850 miles) across, a diameter about 7/8 that of our Moon, while Charon is about 1200 kilometers (750 miles) across, just about the estimate obtained in the 1980 occultation.

This means that in addition to the eight planets, there are seven satel-

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lites (Moon, Io, Europa, Ganymede, Callisto, Titan, and Triton) that are more massive than Pluto. Pluto is neither the fifth largest planetary object in the Solar system, nor the eighth largest, but has shrunk to the sixteenth largest.

In the past, some astronomers had tried to deny the apparently small size of Pluto in order to keep it as a massive and gravitationally-significant body by suggesting that it had a smooth and icy surface, and the dot of light we saw was not Pluto itself but the small reflection of the Sun on that polished surface. Others admitted the small size but tried to keep a high mass by imagining an enormous density.

Now, however, all tricks were done. Pluto was known to be tiny, and its density could be calculated from its volume and its mass. The density turned out to be low, lower than anyone had expected (one more surprise). Pluto is only about 0.55 times as dense as water, less dense even than Saturn, which, at 0.7 times the density of water, had till then been the least dense known planetary object.

Pluto is too small to be made up of the gases, hydrogen, helium and neon, so it must be icy. Of the common ices, frozen methane (a combination of carbon and hydrogen atoms) is the lightest, being about half as dense as water. It may be, then, that Pluto is largely frozen methane, and if so it may have a thin, super-cold atmosphere of methane vapor. Even at Pluto's distance from the Sun, some methane would evaporate, and the vapor would be cold enough to cling even to Pluto's small surface gravity.

Now consider — The mass of Ganymede, Jupiter's largest satellite, is 0.1 thousandths of the mass of its planet. The mass of Titan, Saturn's largest satellite is 0.25 thousandths of the mass of its planet. The mass of Triton, Neptune's largest satellite, is 1.3 thousandths of its planet. The mass of our Moon, Earth's satellite, is, however, 12.3 thousandths of the mass of its planet.

To put it another way, the Moon has 1.23 percent of the mass of the Earth, and no other satellite, before 1978, had anything like that proportion of mass. The Earth and the Moon were the nearest thing to a double planet that we knew of.

Then came Charon, which is just about 100 thousandths (1/10) the mass of Pluto. Compared to Pluto, Charon is eight times the size of the Moon as compared to Earth. The Pluto-Charon combination has thus

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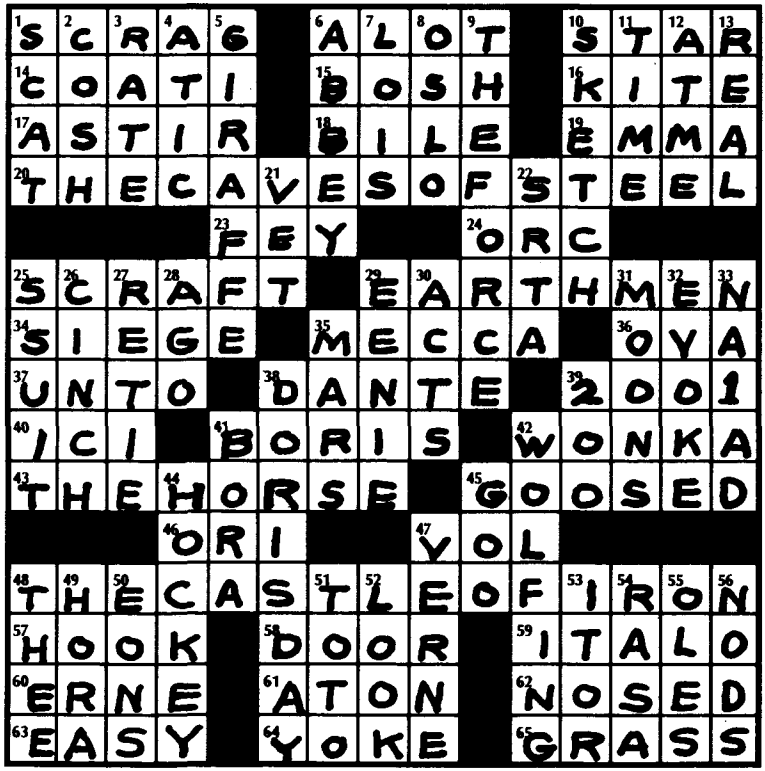
succeeded to the title of "double planet."

One last thing — Pluto and Charon are gravitationally negligible. They cannot have any measurably effect on Uranus's orbit. Yet the anomalies in Uranus's orbit, and, presumably, in Neptune's, too, are still there.

What causes them? Planet X does. It may still be out there somewhere, and it should still be a gas giant as originally presumed. The accidental discovery of the minuscule Pluto has merely diverted our attention from the search, so let's keep on looking.

Answer to February crossword


1 S 2 C 3 R 4 A 5 G
6 A 7 L 8 O 9 T
10 S 11 T 12 A 13 R
14 C O A T I
15 B O S H
16 K I T E
17 A S T I R
18 B I L E
19 E M M A
20 T H E C A 21 V E S O F 22 S T E E L
23 F E Y
24 O R C
25 S 26 C 27 R 28 A F T
29 E 30 A R T H 31 M 32 E 33 N
34 S I E G E
35 M E C C A
36 O Y A
37 U N T O
38 D A N T E
39 2 0 0 1
40 I C I
41 B O R I S
42 W O N K A
43 T H E H O R S E
44
45 G O O S E D
46 O R I
47 V O L
48 T 49 H 50 E C A S 51 T 52 L E O F 53 I 54 R 55 O 56 N
57 H O O K
58 D O O R
59 I T A L O
60 E R N E
61 A T O N
62 N O S E D
63 E A S Y
64 Y O K E
65 G R A S S

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"Evil Water" is a ghost story and more. It is also a tale of a man's perception of reality, a reality that can be altered by the natural — or the supernatural. Ian Watson is a frequent contributor to F&SF, one whose stories go beyond the mere relating of an event. They are characterized by a keen insight into the human condition and a fertile imagination. He writes that he has recently sold a story collection to Gollancz with "Evil Water" as the title story.

Evil Water

BY
IAN WATSON

The vicar, Hubert Smythe, pointed to the humpy field beyond Pook Pond where Charolais cows were grazing. Those cattle were as large as rhino; they seemed closer than they actually were, and the daffodil-bordered lawn fading into wild garden, less extensive. Yet there was no menace in the beasts. Frisky they might be; their tufty woolen coats, reminiscent of the mushroom-colored carpet in the lounge, were visually cuddly.

"Easton Hampcote was sited there in the Middle Ages," the vicar told Paul and Alicia Philips. "That was once the village duck pond. After the Black Death laid us waste—"

"Us?" echoed Alicia and Paul smiled at his wife. Alicia was an agnostic, and the quaintness of this visit by a vicar amused her. Just so long as it did not become a regular practice!

Paul continued smiling, appreciating Alicia. Reasonably slim, long honey hair, challenging blue eyes, fine small breasts, good tanned legs. The bloom of pregnancy was on her, not yet the distortions. He realized that he was undressing her mentally, and his smile died. It had been several weeks since they had last made love. Morning sickness, headache at bedtime, a touch of back pain, womb pain; whatever else.

"One soon feels oneself part of the community. I hope you will, too." The vicar, who must have been only in his early forties, was graying, almost haggard. A poor diet for clerics, on their salary; and he wore cheap clothes. He wouldn't undress in his mind any female members of his flock.

"I'm sure we will," said Alicia. "Paul especially. He's a real chameleon." She darted him an (affectionate?) glance.

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"A chameleon, Mrs. Philips?"

"Private joke, Mr. Smythe. Or should I call you Reverend?"

"Whatever you wish. The younger people sometimes call me Hubert."

"We've had such a string of welcomers," Paul intervened. "Betty Nichols from the Women's Institute, Harry Dale hoping for a gardening job . . ."

He realized he was doing "it" again: unconsciously mimicking, in this case, Hubert Smythe's accent, which was clipped and unctuous, with a strong hint of Midlands, "It" must have begun as a means of ingratiating himself. "Speaking the other fellow's language." The beneficiaries hardly ever seemed to realize, or resent, the subtle parody. So: a useful talent for an insurance manager.

A few times lately, now that he was driving ten miles every morning to the office of Life Mutual in Lederbury, on his own in the Saab he had spoken aloud, trying to overhear the real Paul without success. He would crane his head to glance in the driving mirror at a face — under neat brown hair — that was at once mobile and vacant, as if awaiting expressions to imitate. A pint of water, which would take on whatever shape it was poured into.

Puzzled, the vicar resumed. "The survivors abandoned the old site and rebuilt the village half a mile to the north. Of course, in the nineteenth century and then with Birdland, Easton Hampcote has spread down here again."

"Birdland!" Alicia grinned. "Is that what the locals call the development?"

Nightingale Close, Pigeon Drive, Owl Close, Wren Close, Magpie Close: the private housing formed an ingenious maze, or jigsaw, packing the maximum number of barely detached residences and pocket gardens into the minimum acreage. Owl Close, highest ranking in the price spectrum, favored repro brass carriage lamps in the Georgian-style porches. The Philipses' own house, Hollyhocks, was near the ten-year-old development, but definitely not of it. Hollyhocks was two artisan cottages knocked spaciously into one. A steep tiled roof. (Who but a snob wanted a thatch? Rethatching every seven years. Double the fire insurance.) A fine spread of land at the back ran down to Pook Pond.

"It fits," the vicar said with a smile of complicity. He didn't live in the sprawling old vicarage — the church commissioners had sold that off to a car dealer — but neither did he live in Birdland, half of whose residents seemed comically ambitious to graduate upward to Owl Close and carriage lamps.

"Amazing," said Alicia, "how they had the energy after a plague."

"They would wish to escape a revisitation of the evil. Rat fleas in the straw. Though they didn't know that."

"So why move? Why not stay put

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and pray?" She was needling the vicar, gently.

Hubert Smythe shrugged. "As it happens, they chose providentially. After a fashion, the new village prospered."

"Praise be."

"So those bits of ruins beyond the pond are medieval cottages?" asked Paul.

"Oh no. The little that's left is all under soil. The ruin, such as it is, features on old maps as Barton's Folly. You know Barton Farm over the hill? Owned by the Langleys now?"

Paul nodded. "We've met. Briefly." The tubby, red-faced man with the ethereal wife. They farmed pigs, in intensive housing. When they mucked out onto the concrete, and the wind was in this direction, you certainly knew it.

"Humphrey Barton was a gentleman farmer. Eighteenth century. He traveled around Britain and even in Germany just before the Napoleonic Wars. He conceived a passion for spas, and saw Easton Hampcote as putting in a bid to rival Harrogate or Baden-Baden. He began building on the old village site. Plenty of stone buried there. Pook Pond was to be a centerpiece — deep-ended, marble-floored, roofed over. With statues of nymphs and grottoes. A fantasy! He hired a sculptor. He was going to heat the springwater. He was a man possessed by a vision."

"Why is it called Pook Pond?"

"*Spook*, Mrs. Philips. It's a way of saying "spook.'"

"Have people seen ghosts, then?"

"I haven't, in ten years. What I've seen is mist coiling up from the water. Quite wraithlike, till I shone my torch."

"What a shame. I could fancy a ghost at the bottom of the garden. Ought to be worth another thousand on the price, eh, Paul? 'Large delightful modernized period cottage, the rear laid to lawn and wilderness and ghost.'"

"This *is* a lovely house," agreed the vicar.

"I suppose people in the past thought your mist was the souls of plague victims."

"Drunks thought so, I expect. In the nineteenth century, Easton Hampcote boasted five pubs, would you believe? The strongest ale cost but a penny a pint. The old records say that farm laborers used to lie paralytic in the lanes. Roaming pigs sometimes chewed a finger off, or bit through an ear. But the drunks thought they were seeing the ghost of Humphrey Barton. When his spa scheme foundered, he went mad and drowned himself in Pook Pond, you see. Apparently he roped himself to one of the stone nymphs. Dived in clutching her. She, mm, dragged him down."

Alicia had pursed her lips. "No, I don't see. Why did he go mad?"

Smythe spread his hands. "Why? Disappointment. Obsession. He must

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have been unbalanced to begin. Easton Hampcote was hardly a likely candidate for a fashionable spa. What, a rustic village with a rutted road? Where were the promenades and parks and lodging houses? The concert hall, the library, the assembly rooms?"

"If he was mad to start with," Alicia said logically, "madness can't be why he killed himself."

"Progressive madness, Mrs. Philips. There has always been a lot of madness in the world."

The vicar was staying too long, eking out his cup of Earl Grey tea, hoping for additions to his congregation.

"Yes," said Paul, "all sorts of people have been calling on us. We can hardly get fixed up. I have to repaint the kitchen wall."

"Oh, do excuse me." Smythe rose.

"For instance," said Alicia, "just before lunch there came an emissary demanding Paul's presence at 'Boys' Night.'"

"But there's no youth club, Mrs. Philips. I tried my best. The club collapsed after a year."

Alicia laughed. "Boys' Night is every Friday night at the White Hart. Wives apparently excluded."

During the next couple of months, Paul became a habitué who looked forward to Boys' Night, though this kept him up late and involved drinking more beer than quite suited him, to judge by his head next morning. He'd never lived in a village before. Back in Lederbury, which was almost a city, whenever Alicia had switched on the radio soap opera about the daily lives of country folk, Paul had scoffed at the way the characters never ordered more than half a pint at their local; this seemed like health education propaganda. Now he understood the reason. Unless you always ordered halves, given the number of rounds, you'd never get through the night.

It was gregarious Matthew Davies who guided Paul into the Friday night ritual commencing around nine, concluding when the White Hart's patrons felt so inclined. Since there was no police house in Easton Hampcote, at drinking-up time, landlord Ronnie Wilson simply latched the front door of his pub and closed the curtains. He rarely draped towels over the pump handles — of Everard's, Fuller's, and Bass — till half-eleven, not always then. The record was half past midnight.

Gangly, freckled, and redheaded, Matt Davies was a biochemistry graduate of twenty years' vintage, an executive at Whitney's, the agricultural research center on the northern fringe of the village that Paul drove past every morning and evening. A high chain-link fence surrounded the offices and labs, but not the pastures and livestock sheds. The barrier at the gatehouse was generally left in the up

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position, though guard dogs patrolled at night. Whitney's was researching new antibiotic additives for feed, and hormone boosters. The center employed several villagers as cleaners, gardeners, and canteen staff; its salaried staff tended to live in Birdland — as did Matt, who often wittily mocked life in the aviary.

Matt was no more a native of Easton Hampcote than Paul or the vicar or most of the other inhabitants. A couple of "aboriginal" families survived — the Tates, the Dingles — but Paul and Alicia had been surprised at what a melting pot, or crossroads, the village was. One rural odd-job man proved to be a wartime evacuee from the East End of London. Another rustic gaffer hailed from the south coast, via the merchant navy.

A melting pot — or a rich stew, after the blandness of Lederbury. . . . A lot of oddities lived in this village: a hippie-ish book illustrator; a professional conjurer; a retired submarine commander who had visited the North Pole; a retired, half-Russian lady gymnast; a lady potter; an expert potholer; a Dutch herbalist; an Australian husband and wife who ran a mail-order lingerie business.

People still fell into sets, with a certain amount of crossover. There was the churchgoing fraternity, the "smart set," the farmers and Young Farmers, the Tories and fox hunters, the Council House people, the Birdlanders, the beer-and-darts mob, and the Americans — two American families lived off base in Birdland, both white, both pilot grade.

Paul supposed that Matt and he belonged to a mixture of smart set and beer set. Along with Bill Morrison, planning officer for the district council; Conrad Golby, antiques exporter; and Adrian Waller, who farmed in the village.

In the White Hart of a Friday night, there was farming talk and property talk, school talk and car talk, sports and beer and food talk, and misadventure talk.

"Stuck his car in the ditch Tuesday night. Slept in the back. That's the third time. Don't know how he gets away with it . . ."

"Took the family to the Boatman. Steak as big as my plate, I couldn't finish . . ."

"Bass? needs to stand for three days before you tap a barrel . . ."

"So the rain came down, and the center court was a waterfall . . ."

"Pearces are asking eighty grand."

"No, Becky got a *B* in German."

"Wimbledon."

"Beef in Guinness."

"*Ninety* thousand? They'll be lucky."

"It's going to auction."

"Just a recall for the seat-belt mounting."

"Steroids for steers, as our Texan friends might put it. Lowers the fat content of the beef. We're working on some pretty potent. . . . Put a drop

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of that in your baby's bottle! Deoxycorticosterone."

"Who?"

"Water-balance regulator."

"Bloody discos! Had to call the police to Fardley village hall last week. One lad got *stabbed*. You just can't have a ticket-only do. Word gets round. Your Young Farmers want to raise funds, but they don't want the responsibility, do they?"

"Whose round is it, anyway?"

The White Hart was also the hangout for the older boys and girls who had spurned the vicar's youth club. They gossiped in whispers, giggled, sat in silence, cuddled, drank shandies, played the STOWAWAY gambling machine in the hall. The girls tended either to be overweight or punkishly, anorexically skinny, but one or two were attractive — particularly Sally Dingle, who had left school and worked in the canteen at Whitney's. Paul didn't see her in the pub as often as the others, of a Friday night or Sunday lunchtime, though he spotted her wandering about the village solo and managed to say hello several times.

She was perhaps a bit on the buxom side, emphasized by tight jeans, and her breasts were ampler than he really cared for, but she had an air about her of . . . what? Not exactly sophistication, though she applied blushers and shaders to her pert oval face (with sparkling eyes of rain on slate) and highlights to her straw-blonde hair to good effect. Not exactly sensuality; she appeared to have no boyfriend (any more than she had a close girlfriend), nor much interest along those lines. Far from making a beeline, the local boys seemed to shy away. Perhaps, thought Paul, her potential challenged them beyond their present adolescent capacities.

Yes, that was it: Sally Dingle had potential, and she knew it, but withheld it from her peers, who therefore resented her faintly. It was as though she were waiting, and despising. Waiting for what? Maybe she read romances and her head was fogged with illusions.

Paul was more aware of Sally — only casually, to be sure — because Alicia still refrained from making love for one reason or another. One night she even said, "I can't. I feel we're being watched. Listened to. They're so nosy in this village. They need to know everything. It's all very well for you, away in Lederbury every day. If I wash my nightdress, someone's staring at the clotheslines next morning looking for stains. I'm sure Mrs. Badgot has X-ray eyes and can see through walls."

"Don't you like it here, then?" he'd asked.

"Oh yes. It's idyllic after Lederbury."

What could he say to that?

Another night she cried, "What's that? Someone's prowling in the garden."

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No one was, though he went outside in his pajamas with a torch. Alicia had gone to sleep when he got back.

Sally Dingle. She did look at Paul with covert interest, as though she knew him. Well, obviously she *did* know him. Yet not exactly "know" in the ordinary sense. As though she . . . expected something, and despised whatever it was. Did she expect Paul to . . . ? It was ridiculous even to imagine.

At the Life Mutual office, Paul found himself paying compliments to one of the typists, then suggesting a lunchtime drink. She accepted; and over vodka and lemonade, plus smoked salmon sandwiches, the girl told him casually about her union's stand on sexual harassment in the workplace. His own secretary remarked pointedly that she and her boyfriend had nearly saved the down payment on a flat.

Paul was working down in the wild garden, from where it looked to be a long way to the house. He was sorting a pile of ironstone that had been overgrown with nettles. Down at soil level he had just uncovered a perfect ring of stones neatly dovetailed together. He was troweling rubbish out from inside the ring when a voice said close by, "You going to open the well up? You shouldn't, lightly."

His heart jumped. Sally Dingle was standing behind him in her jeans and a floppy muslin blouse that sunlight shone through, outlining her.

"Is that what it is, an old well? Did you want to speak to me, Sally?"

She smiled. "That's what I'm doing. Speaking."

"Did you want something special?"

"What would be special then, Mr. Philips?" She eyes him. "I'm just passing through, by Pook Pond."

"Excuse me, Sally, but aren't you sort of trespassing on our property?" (Had it been *her* that Alicia thought she heard that night?)

"There's a right-of-way. Across this corner of your garden, round the pond, over the fields."

"A right? There was nothing in the deeds. There's nothing on the district council's map. It shows every *tree*."

"The right's ancient."

"Why don't the Ramblers use it? They were tramping by last week." A party of giant garden gnomes in their laced-up boots, knee socks, green and red anoraks, and woolly hats. "I thought they made a point of crossing any scrap of land where there's a right." Adrian had told him so; a disputed right leading through the Wallers' farmyard was a bone of contention between him and the Ramblers Association.

"Too old for them to know."

"You aren't ancient, Sally. So how do you know?"

"How old am I, then?" She smirked. "Old enough."

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"What did you mean, I shouldn't open the well lightly? Why not? It should look romantic."

"Romantic, is it?"

"Rebuild the sides; put a pitched roof on. Bingo: wishing well. Cast-iron grill across, use it as a barbecue.

"Use it for water-wishing. Water don't like fire."

"Don't it?" He realized that he was falling into her speech patterns, adapting to her, like peas in a pod, like the wedded in bed. "What?" he barked.

"Dip a babe in the right water, wish; it'll never die a natural death of body rot, only violence and treachery. Like a stab in the heel." Obviously she was repeating something half remembered from school about Achilles, whose mother dipped him in the Styx. "You got the water-touch; I know. Our bodies are mostly water, see? Ninety percent or more. We're walking bags of water. When the right water shifts itself, it shows you what's underneath. You got the flow but it's dammed." (Or did she say "damned?") "Your water-sight's pent up." (Or did she say "site?") "Some water's alive, and dissolves illusions. Juice of the earth."

"You're having me on, Sally."

"Am I? Come down to your well on Lammas at midnight, if you've dug it out, an' you may see something; or may not." She nodded toward the house. "On Lammas you keep her out of the way. An' I'll keep out of hers."

Paul looked toward the house, thinking that Alicia was watching them talk; but she wasn't. When he turned back, Sally was already by Pook Pond, outside of their boundary, staring at the muddy water that a Charolais had stirred up. She must have run away on tiptoe.

"Who was that over by the pond earlier, Paul?"

"What? Oh, the Dingle girl, what's she called?"

"Sally Dingle."

"Right. *Listen*, I've made a discovery — and I've an absolutely wonderful idea. We have a well down in the wild area . . ."

Lammas proved to be the first of August, several weeks away.

"That's the old name for harvest festival," Adrian told Paul on Boys' Night. "Smythe and the faithful might still call it Lammas, for all I know. When all arable farmers give thanks for subsidies from the Common Market, and the grain mountain, and oilseed rape that paints our English fields bright yellow like Italy."

"Bit early for a harvest, isn't it? End of July? I thought harvest festivals were in September."

"Wonders of technology," remarked Matt.

"I think Lammas was more to jolly the harvest along. Pagan thing. They probably fucked in the fields."

Paul's heart beat faster.

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"Personally," Adrian went on, "I haven't been inside a church for years. Bunch of hypocrites. It's the bitches and gossips that go there. They need forgiving."

"Give thanks, too," chipped in Matt, "for growth hormones. Steroids. Biotics. Oops, I believe my glass is empty."

"We can take a hint." Conrad Golby drained his own mug, and waved it through the mob at a harried Mary Wilson. An outstretched arm was the closest he could get to the bar. Young Farmers packed it out, while in the other half of the room the rubber-matted pitch leading up to the dart board was deeply cordoned by team members and spectators; Easton Hampcote was playing a friendly with Fardley. A shifting of bodies briefly revealed the full-frontal calendar on the far wall, published by a car accessories firm. Above hung the joke clock, where the hands turned counter-clockwise.

"I heard on the radio," said Bill Morrison, "that all these antibiotics we eat in good old meat are knocking out our resistance to flu."

"Load of bollocks, Morry," said Adrian.

"Bullocks' balls," agreed Matt. "Heard this one? How do you get an Irishman to climb on the roof? . . . You tell him the drinks are on the house!"

"There's something I did want to ask you," Paul heard himself saying to Adrian. "is there anything funny about the Dingle clan?"

"What kind of funny?"

"Oh, inbreeding. Paganism, Madness." Paul grinned loosely. "Usual rural stuff."

Matt dug him in the ribs. "I wouldn't mind breeding with that Sally Dingle."

Paul did his best not to twitch. "I expected a village at least to boast a spot of ancient devilry."

"You'll be lucky. Old Ned Dingle's a baptist. So's his missus. When they bother."

Baptist? Was that how Sally got her strange notions about the power of water?

"Funny thing *did* happen ten, twelve years ago," said Adrian. "When my oldest had just started school. We had our own primary school in the village then, before the kids got bused. Commander Potter's place: that's the old schoolhouse. Bought it for twelve and a half. We thought he was crazy."

"What do you reckon it's worth now?" asked Morry.

"Ooh, a good ninety."

"What type of funny thing?" Paul reminded Adrian.

"Some playground brawl. They said that little Sally Dingle spat in a lad's eyes — he wanted her to show him you-know-what, and she did, but then she spat — and he went stone-blind. The Merricks' son; they moved soon after, to get near a special school."

"She blinded him by *spitting*?"

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"Hospital said it was hysterical blindness, since they couldn't find anything physically wrong." Adrian tapped his temple. "That's why they needed a special school."

Conrad began hauling fresh half-pints of Everard's shoulder-high from the bar, like an angler reeling in his catch.

By the end of July, Paul had finished building the wishing well-cum-barbecue. The well had proved to be blocked off with spongy old timbers under a few inches of soil and rubble. He'd easily torn the rotting rubbish out, revealing a deep shaft. A torch lowered on a string showed the stones to be large and unmortared. The soil in Easton Hampcote, even in their own garden, varied wildly. Here it seemed to be solid yellow clay, which could explain how the shaft had been cut and had survived — for goodness knows how many centuries — without collapsing. To Paul's surprise, a bucket on a rope brought up water clear as gin. He felt relieved once he had completed a stout circular curtain wall and had fitted a heavy iron grill over the top, removable so that he could water the garden in the event of drought. A dovecote-style roof on rustic poles followed. Next year, when the wilderness had been further tamed, they would throw an outdoor party for the Wallers, the Davieses, the Morrisons, the Golbys, whose wives Alicia had met through the Women's Institute.

Her pregnancy — their pregnancy — followed its course, and her belly was plumping. The fetus had been scanned acoustically, a needle had been poked into her womb to sample the water; no abnormalities apparent, though she did complain of back pain and a varicose vein. Under the circumstances, she didn't wish him to lie on top of her, nor did she fancy squatting impaled on him.

On the first of August, Paul brought home a bottle of fine champagne and insisted on a celebration.

When he refilled her glass for the third time, she gave him a peculiar look. "What are you trying to do, souse the baby? Get it drunk in charge of a womb? I'll be all acidic in the morning."

In fact, two-and-a-bit glasses were ample; Alicia slept soundly.

Paul stayed awake in bed by meditating about mortgages. At quarter to twelve he slipped from the sheets, from the room. Downstairs he pulled a raincoat over his pajamas and climbed into rubber boots.

It was a hot, still, dark night with a yellow sickle moon only intermittently visible through cloud. He debated taking the torch, but knew the way and had no wish to signal his presence. Walking down the lawn, through the wild garden to the well, he kept his eyes peeled. He waited.

A movement in the field? One of the cows?

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The moon broke through, no longer meager yellow but forged of white-hot steel that silvered Pook Pond. Sally was standing on the far bank, also dressed in a raincoat, not that any rain threatened. She opened the coat, let it fall. She had been naked underneath.

As she stepped nude into the pond, he was no longer seeing a muddy watering hole and a fringe of ruins. He saw a large bath with gleaming stone steps, stone surrounds, marble benches, sculptures of nymphs and satyrs, a hint of pillars rising. Sally stood thigh-deep, water lapping at her pubic hair, gazing across at him expressionlessly. His erection pushed at his raincoat, having thrust through his pajamas. Then she submerged herself.

Cloud ate the moon, and for a few disconcerting moments he could see nothing; was blind. He clutched at the larch pole of the well for reassurance, felt the rutted cracking bark. When his night vision returned, there was only the dim outline of the pond, no bather evident.

Trot along Sally's "right" to the bank? Discover her standing ankle-deep in mud among the cow pats? He doubted it. Find her coat cast down on the grass as bedding? Hardly.

It seemed so dark now. No one could possibly see him, even from a few feet away. His erection was almost painful.

He loosened the coat; held himself. Sally's afterimage lingered. Almost immediately he ejaculated into the well.

He went back to the house, and up to bed. Surely he had experienced a waking dream, a hysterical vision, a sort of self-hypnotism.

Alicia stirred, and groaned.

When he returned from Lederbury the following evening, Sally was loitering near the open five-bar gate of Hollyhocks. Paul swung the Saab in onto the shingle fronting the house and got out.

"Hello, Sally." He felt himself flush.

"Enjoy yourself on Lammas night?"

"Um," he said.

"See somethin'?"

"Saw what I saw." That sounded like a good country answer.

"An' you gave youself t' water," she said, and walked away.

Gave himself to water? He remembered how he had ejaculated into the well. She couldn't have seen that; even if she had been there in the first place.

After greeting Alicia briefly, he hurried down the garden and stooped over the iron grill. Any stains that might have been his doing were indistinguishable from other marks. Suddenly he gripped the grill and wrestled it free. The bucket was still upside down beside the well, with the rope coiled underneath. He dropped the bucket down deep and hauled water

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up, emptied it over the grass. Absurdly he felt that it was urgent to recover himself — his substance — from the well. He had hauled up and dumped a dozen bucketfuls without any sign of hitting bottom when Alicia walked up.

"Funny homecoming! Did you lose something down it?"

"Damn fountain pen. Fell out."

"Isn't *that* your fountain pen?" Her ring finger pointed at his breast pocket.

"Different one. Borrowed it from Tom at work. Now it's gone."

"Are you sure it fell down the well?"

" 'Course I'm sure!"

"When? Just now?"

"Ye — No, yesterday."

"Hence your sudden dash down the garden? Well, a pen would probably sink. So it's lost. Better buy Tom a new one."

After that he could hardly continue trawling. Why was he trawling anyway?

"Why guard dogs?" echoed Matt. "Look, Paul, if any idiot — burglar or vandal or industrial spy — broke in and breached the safe-handling are—"

"Safe-handling?"

"For experimental hormones. The tailored ones. We have to dump some concentrates in the furnace. Can't have chickens sprouting four legs. Much as the poultry trade might appreciate it!"

"Are you serious?"

Matt paused before replying, " 'Course not. Drink up. My round."

"I think we ought to have our baby christened properly," said Alicia.

Paul looked up, amazed, from his plate of beef Bourguignon. "You're joking."

"It seems vaguely appropriate, in an old village. Doesn't commit us — or the baby — to anything. I was speaking to Hubert the other day."

"So the vicar's been working on you?"

"It wouldn't do any harm. Picturesque ceremony. Grandparents would like it. Take snapshots."

"You wouldn't get old Adrian trotting along."

"Do we want to? But you might be surprised."

"Astonished is more like it. You don't believe the nonsense. It's almost an insult to our child."

"Hardly. It's part of belonging to the community. It'll do us good."

"We already do belong."

"What you belong to, I don't necessarily belong to. Late nights at the pub while I'm—"

"O.K., O.K. I've no bitingly radical objection. Mind, I think it's disingenuous."

"Fancy word, that be," she mocked in a broad accent that no one local actually used.

"O.K. I give up."

"Good. Hubert will call round to chat to us."

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"We don't need to go to church for weeks on end, do we?"

"Only the once."

The baby was due in late October. Autumn was an Indian summer with warm, still nights, temperature dipping only two or three degrees. In the garden of Hollyhocks, hollyhocks reared high their spikes of rose and burgundy flowers, blooms made out of crepe paper by slightly clumsy children.

On the first Friday in October, Paul was in the White Hart as ever, though he had promised a terminally pregnant Alicia not to stay too late. Sally wasn't in the pub; he hadn't spotted her since the day he had tried to bail out the well. Glancing at his watch, he found to his surprise that it was going on for eleven.

"I'll be off, Matt. I'll just win a fortune on the way out. I'll bust its guts."

The gambling machine in the hall had been changed. Odd that he hadn't noticed this on his way in. He recalled how earlier the village lads had been clustered round it.

No wonder; the new machine was named STRIPTEASE.

Each letter in the word overlayed a woman in successive states of undress. Numbered fruits on the win line caused that number of letters to light up. Instead of a query mark to signal a random chance, there was a sinuous nude with one hand across her breasts, the other clutched between her thighs.

He fed in the coins, hoping for a hold so that he could complete the word and light up the flashing option features allowing him to "stroke" or "grope" or "thrust" his way toward jackpot.

Ronnie had already doused the hall lights, leaving the STRIPTEASE machine alone lit up, bright and pulsing. As Paul played, racking up nine letters of the word before losing them again, the stripper's face began more and more to resemble Sally's. He won minor prizes and fed them back, then more change from his pocket. His pulse was racing. He must succeed in stripping Sally, to be able to stroke or grope or thrust his way to victory.

A query-nude popped into place. Lights ran along the STRIPTEASE panel, inviting, denying. He thumped the button; the word lit as far as STRIP. The nude held, and he scored fruit worth two apiece. He couldn't lose. He thumped the START button. T-E-A-S-E lit up. The machine played an electronic fanfare. Lights flashed from "thrust" to "stroke" to "grope." He punched "stroke." Softly softly catchee monkey. Reels clicked up and down. Three nudes appeared. The machine played "Kiss Me Tender." A hitherto blank panel came to life, showing Sally lying stark naked, spread-eagled on a bed. The payout slot began to ejaculate tokens.

"Triumph, eh boy?" Matt poked

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his head round the door.

Hot — yet why should he feel guilty? — Paul stared back at the machine.

It was the same machine as last time: STOWAWAY. The glass frontage showed a sailing ship with an angry captain and sailors chasing a stowaway who was trying to reach the jackpot hold. There had never been any such machine as STRIPTEASE. Yet he had played it for ten minutes. He had believed he was playing it. He must be drunk, so drunk that he was seeing things. He didn't feel specially drunk. The flashing lights in the dark of the hall must somehow have mesmerized him, put him in a trance in which he hallucinated. He staggered against the heavy box in shock — as if embracing it. He realized he had an erection. Turning to hide this, he fled toward the door to let himself out into the protective darkness.

"Hey! How about your winnings?"

"Cash them in for me, Matt, will you? Have a drink. A short. I just remembered I'm expecting a phone call."

He stared up at the flood of the Milky Way. The Big Dipper pointed the way back home.

Diamond-frost stars, those! However, the night was much milder than those sharp stars diagnosed. No need to zip his coat. On the contrary, he felt overheated, sought the caress of the breeze.

He tried to forget about the striptease machine but couldn't. An electronic succubus, all of his own imagining . . .

At Pook Corner a shadow detached itself from the bushes.

"Ev'nin', Mr. Philips."

"Sally!" He smelled musky perfume. She was wearing that raincoat, buttoned up to the neck; boots on her feet.

"Did you get a jackpot, then?"

"What?" he gasped. He often played the machine in the pub; the good old STOWAWAY. She would know that.

"Oh, I knew, Paul. I could feel your fingers on the buttons, couldn't I? Touching and pushing. Holding and stroking. I'm sensitive, remember?"

Telepathy, thought Paul. Unless somehow Sally *caused* his hallucination.

She bumped up against him, and he began to kiss her. His hand roved down her back, circulated around her buttocks. He was sure she was wearing nothing under the coat. She ground her loins against his, groaning faintly, as a cat growls over a mouse it has caught. He seemed to hear liquid running from her, down her legs. Juices, from the excited wetness in her. No, it was the standpipe nearby. . . . Which was still leaking vigorously despite the parish council's efforts at volunteer repair.

She resisted. "Rose Cottage is empty. I have the back door key with me."

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"How's that?"

"I've lots of old keys, Paul. Keys going back for centuries. Come with me."

So he went.

She tugged him by the hand, up twisty pitch-black stairs that she seemed to know well. Only a carpet and open curtains remained in the starlit room she drew him into; plus an abandoned single mattress lying by the wall.

She kicked off her boots, dropped her coat. Naked, Sally began to unbutton him, unzip him, stroke him, and lick him. His body was someone else's — hers. It was behaving as *it* wanted to behave. As she wanted it to behave. His muscles and nerves rippled like harp strings, playing water-music. Soon he had entered her, upon the mattress; soon he pumped himself into her.

Sally was whispering. "Blamed her for the Plague, bloody fools. So they ducked her. That's what they did to women as they thought was witches. Or as they *knew* to be. Not that witches did 'em harm. Helped 'em. Kept their waters sweet. Trussed her up tight, they did, and tossed her in Pook Pond with a rope to haul her out again if the fancy took them. If she sank, she wasn't a witch, see. They might pull her ashore afore she drowned; or after. She was guilty if she floated?

"Huh. A girl with water-magic floated on Pook Pond, all right. What did they do then? Well, what?"

What was she telling him? That she, Sally, had been a witch in an earlier life? That she'd been reborn — into a family that could well have lived here ever since medieval times? A — how appropriate — a baptist family. When she was barely knee-high, she'd rediscovered her affinity for certain water . . .

"Naw. Witches weren't burnt in this country. Just heretics was. Ord'narily they hanged witches."

"So they hanged the poor girl."

"Naw. They had a bright idea. Boiled me alive in a caldron. Till I scalded to death. Till the flesh floated off me bones. Then they fed the stew to the hogs."

"You . . ."

A thought crossed his mind. Could those ignorant peasants of an earlier epoch have guessed that the boiling of water killed off any harm in it? Any germs, or imps? Was there something in the springwater? Down the well? And in Pook Pond? Some sort of collective microscopic life? Some . . . spirit? Yes, like those spirits that the Greeks believed had haunted pools. An ancient force that could enter its devotee and permeate her waters? This was a spirit that, in Sally's saliva when she wished ill, could blind a boy . . .

"That was their mistake. When they ate those hogs, they ate me. So I

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come back. An' I keeps comin' back. As I came to Master Humphrey."

"What?"

"Humphrey Barton. When we made love, him and me, he promised he'd build me a temple for our water. Ours. Later on he said he'd ***heat*** the water. He'd boil it. I remembered how I'd been boiled alive; an' I hated him for that. I'll never drink tea, you know. Or coffee. Only milk and fruit drinks. An' springwater."

Paul felt afraid. He had to leave, get away.

"You can bail me out from this bloody boring village," she murmured. "I've waited. I've watched out. You're the one. Knew you'd turn up. Water showed me."

"Sally, I'm just an insurance manager, not a millionaire."

"That'll do. Lots of money in insurance."

"Checks; not cash. Electronic money. I don't have any safe I can rob, and run off with the loot to South America or whatever mad idea—!"

"Never asked you to. I"m not a fool. Think I'd want to be Mrs. Paul Philips the Second for years? I deserve more. You're going to sell my mum and dad insurance. Lots of it. Hundred thousand. To look after their little girl in case of accident. Instead of 'Let's trust in the Lord'! The water in their tea'll persuade them. Next it'll poison them, same as it poisoned those dumb buggers once before. I've the power, you know. You saw on Lammas. Want to watch the other scene? Where those bastards dunked and boiled their wise girl? I could arrange it."

"I don't want to. No."

"While it happens, I'll go away for a week or two. I'll be staying with me aunt in Scotland. You'll not make any fuss about the claim."

She was deranged. Dangerous. But he believed her. No, there wasn't a "spirit" in the spring that fed Pook Pond. Couldn't be. There was a spirit in her. A talent. A terrible power. A knowledge.

In Rose Cottage that night, he'd given his substance to her — his living fluid — far more directly than he'd done at the well on Lammas midnight.

"I suppose you fancy living it up in London? Or is it Monte Carlo? Or New York? You'd be leaving your pond, your source. A . . . priestess surely can't do that."

"Think so, Paul? I carry me water with me. In me bladder, in me veins. In ever watery cell of me body. And think! You'd have me out of the way. You could live tame again. Maybe you don't want that, eh?" Her hand aroused him, despite all. "An' I'll be ***wild*** if I don't get what I want. Wild."

Yes. And he would be an accessory to murder, as well as a partner in fraud.

Finally he escaped. He didn't arrive home till two o'clock, creeping in quiet as a mouse. As usual, Alicia

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had left some lights on. Hastily he killed those in case she woke and spotted the alarm clock.

She did stir. "Paul? That you?"

"Me."

"Wha's time?" Already he could hear that she had turned over again.

"Bit after twelve," he murmured. " 'Night."

He dreamed he was heading down the garden toward the well. A fierce suction drew him against his will; a powerful, dragging draft. If only he could break free, run back to the safety of Hollyhocks, slam and bolt the door. When he looked desperately for reassurance, the house was no longer there. Other cottages loomed in the night, rough stone hovels thatched with straw. In vain he dug in his heels; he seemed to slide over the grass — till he came up against the wall of the well, which he gripped limply. His hands were jelly, meat boiled off a bone. How the mouth of the well dragged at him, the air current kissing and sucking. The deep, dark well: down in its blackwater depths was death. And something worse; something prehuman and vile that would swallow his mind and play with it, during gibbering, insane eternity.

Terror woke him, sweating. He slid from bed, hurriedly felt his way to the toilet (somehow avoiding the hands of darkness), switched on the light. He sat a long time, reading a travel magazine.

Finally he dared turn off the light and creep back to bed.

He was woken, what seemed moments later, by inhuman nasal screaming. Hogs were fighting over the swill of the witch's boiled flesh and guts. It was still dark. Then he recognized the grind of a truck engine, the groan of springs and chassis.

Pigs on their way to be slaughtered.

Pigs crowded onto two tiers of Sam Langley's huge old truck, which was cornering, heading up the village.

The pigs were fighting because they were packed in with strangers. And were shit-scared. They'd been driven from hot, wallowing, smelly sleep in their intensive-rearing shed into another world — a chilly, tight, roaring, swerving alien world where they could only scream; but their desperate panic shrieks wouldn't help. The rumble of the truck and the squealing quickly receded. How much more hygienic — for the human inhabitants — than in the nineteenth century, when the pigs roamed free, and might bite a paralytic peasant boozer's hand in half.

He lay thinking about witchcraft. A witch needed you to ***believe*** in her powers, wasn't that so? And it helped if she owned some part of you. A hank of hair. A nail clipping. Semen, blood. Or else nothing would happen. Unfortunately he did believe in Sally Dingle. Since Lammas night. Since the STRIPTEASE machine.

Those "experiences" had been

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caused by autohypnosis. By his own mind. Surely.

Begin to disbelieve, then! Command yourself to be a skeptic!

How?

He spent the next few days exercising his skeptical faculty. He rehearsed a certain inevitable encounter.

As he was driving back home through the village a week later, at six-thirty, the headlights of the Saab picked up Sally walking toward the White Hart. He stopped the car beside her, beneath the illuminated inn sign.

He spoke harshly. "Now you listen to me. Your parents won't be taking out any policies with Life Mutual, *ever*. That's the end of it all. Understand?"

Her eyes moistened. She didn't seem to be crying, exactly. Her voice was as cool as the evenings had now become.

"The end, is it? Maybe you need some more . . . incentive."

"No, I don't."

"Didn't say what kind of incentive, did I? Wasn't necessarily offerin' you another night in Rose Cottage."

"You can no more threaten me than you can bribe me. I'd deny everything. Wild fantasies of yours."

"*Wild*, yes."

"No one would believe that we had, well . . ."

He oughtn't to have halted under the lit-up sign. He could always say, if challenged, that Sally had recently been accosting him in a totally silly way. He hadn't told anyone, so as not to upset Alicia at a critical time. So as not to lose face with the Boys. They, too, would have refused Sally's advances; but you had to pretend otherwise.

"Suppose they mightn't," she conceded. She did seem remarkably self-possessed.

He nodded, gratified. "So any sort of blackmail is out."

"Any mundane sort."

"Mundane, eh? Fancy word, that be." He imitated Alicia imitating a joke yokel. "What's the other sort?"

"You know."

"No, I don't, I don't believe in you, Sally, not one scrap. Medieval witches boiled in great big caldrons? Blah. Medieval peasants never owned a witch-size caldron. That's straight out of fairy tales — or Disney. Magic water? Ho-hum."

"A few bottles of *that* in church, the way the vicar carries on!"

Paul sniggered. "Constipated water."

"Different kind, though," Sally said. "Much weaker."

He shook his head. "I don't believe the least little bit. You and Humphrey Barton? Bollocks."

The pub door opened, and Mary Wilson stood framed there.

"Hey Paul!" she called. "No time for a drink. Your Alicia's waters broke half an hour ago, real sudden. Pains only just came on. Mrs. Smythe drove

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her in to the Maternity."

Paul revved, and mounted the tarmac outside the pub, to turn. Sally dodged away. "That'll show her I mean business," he thought, with a twitch of satisfaction.

How did Mary Wilson know so soon? As Alicia said: people in Easton Hampcote knew what you were eating for dinner before you knew it yourself. Except, they didn't know about Sally and him; of that he felt positive.

He sped toward the hospital, back the way he had just come. He must have passed the Smythes' old Ford en route earlier and not noticed. He had been planning his encounter, and practicing skepticism. Well, those had paid off.

The birth was remarkably rapid; however, the presiding surgeon inflicted an unnecessarily vigorous episiotomy to enlarge the opening, requiring a number of stitches. Alicia murmured that she had heard through an anesthetic fog his assistant protesting at this. No doubt it was inconsiderately late in the day for a mother to give birth; maybe the surgeon was going out for supper? Alicia had refused her consultant's persuasions to check in a few days early and have the birth induced with a prostaglandin drip, labor thus commencing in the morning and concluding by late afternoon. Here was the payback.

To himself, too, Paul reflected. That cut in Alicia's vagina would delay the renewal of lovemaking by weeks. Or longer. A woman could stay sore for months.

Yet he wasn't thinking too much along those lines. He was a *father* — of a well-formed baby boy. He and Alicia were parents, of David Gordon Philips, Alicia's choice of names. A solid, handsome ring to them.

The nurse on duty also forgot to bring Alicia a milk-suppressant tablet — she wasn't planning to give suck —but Paul sorted that out.

He stayed while he and she fed David Gordon his first bottle; then the baby was carried off to its plastic bubble-chamber in another room. Alicia would need to stay in the hospital for a week to ten days. Likewise baby. The medical profession expected him to develop postnatal jaundice, and were already removing test samples of blood from the ball of his poor little foot as if to deplete his supply of the red stuff.

Exhausted, Alicia faded out; and Paul drove home a second time, vaguely cursing doctors.

He visited every evening, using up the intervening couple of hours by working late at the office, then catching an early pint and a pub meal: hot pie, cheeseburger, and chips. A pint, in Lederbury, yes. He wouldn't arrive back at Hollyhocks till nearly ten.

On the third night, Sally was waiting in the shadows.

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"Sorry and all that," he told her definitively, "but bugger off."

That night, after he had climbed into bed alone, he saw again the afterimage of her, nude in Humphrey Barton's fine spa bath.

Fair enough. This at least was no nightmare of falling down a well, disappearing into darkness. He could cope with that particular image easily enough; and he did, then went to sleep.

Next night was Boys' Night, so he went directly from the hospital to the White Hart. It was only a short drive home afterward, unmonitored by police.

Matt didn't seem his normal jokey, chipper self. Brooding into his beer?

"What's up, Matt?"

Matt contrived a grin. "Up? Don't talk dirty."

"You seemed preoccupied."

"I was thinking about the magpies of Birdland. Wondering which ones would like to fly from Whitney's to a better-feathered nest overseas. Migrating to the sunny dollar."

Conrad Golby was quick on the uptake that night. "Why magpies? Why not owls or nightingales? Has somebody nicked something?"

Laughing, Matt dealt Conrad a friendly cuff. "You'd know all about nicking in the antiques biz! When was the last time the boys in blue turned you over?"

"*Has* someone? Stolen? Secret formulas? Inside job?"

Matt shook his head. "Nope. Heard the one about the stripper with the artificial leg . . . ?"

They hadn't.

"Hath this child been already baptized or no?"

What a stupid question, thought Paul. If it were already baptized, why would we be here?

"No," replied Alicia. The baby was limp in her arms, half asleep.

Standing by the font, she was a radiant madonna. Madonna with child, in a long robe of Victorian lace. Surely that was the true symbolic aim of the christening ceremony: to transform every mother into Mary, every infant into Jesus (or his sister).

A bitter thought intruded: David Gordon's might as well have been a virgin birth! And now that wretched cut and those stitches. Paul itched. Guiltily he glanced along the aisle; however, Sally wasn't lurking anywhere that he could see.

The vicar began to pray. Quite a gathering was standing to attention. Two godparents by the font: an old school chum of Alicia's, Maggie, and Raymond Thwaite, their ex-best man. Two sets of grandparents upright in the front row, looking proud. Maggie's husband, Bob, and Mrs. Thwaite. An aunt and cousin of Alicia's, and her younger sister Antonietta. Paul's older brother, Daniel, with whom he never really saw eye to eye. A scattering of the church regulars, Mrs. Badgot

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prominent; and the Boys' Night indomitables (including, wonder of wonders, Adrian), plus wives and kids. No Sally. Thank God.

He'd been a fool, and his folly would likely find him out; though not today. If he itched, he should scratch that itch well away from home. Easier said than done. No, he shouldn't have scratched it at all.

Hubert Smythe raised his voice, as if in an attempt — unsuccessful — to capture Paul's attention.

"*None can enter* into the Kingdom of God except he be born anew of water—"

The old stone church possesed only one stained-glass window, and that was out of character: a First World War memorial in rose and violet with several soldiers being exhorted by an angel — their company commander — to go through the barbed wire to heaven, surely a rapid route. Several marble bas-reliefs dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were inscribed with pious encomiums praising gentlemanly charity and valor, ladylike sweetness and forbearance. Black-painted plaques from the pragmatic nineteenth century specified the amount of charity: five pounds willed to furnish bread for the parish poor. Nearer the font, in an enormous flagstone, a brass inlay of a local knight had been worn by centuries of tread till it was a featureless golden puddle. Yellow chrysanthemums crowded vases.

". . . Suffer the little children," the vicar was reading. Alicia glanced sharply at Paul; an angry madonna.

"Praise be—," the congregation chorused raggedly; just as Alicia had quipped to the vicar months ago, apropos the village's recovery from the plague. Now she was uttering the response with feeling.

Would Sally tell, out of venom? If so, he, too, could tell a tale! About how Sally Dingle had planned . . .

. . . for her parents to take out substantial life insurance? Unprovable.

How she aimed to poison them both? "By witchcraft, sir, is that so?" Already Paul could hear the scornful tones of the imaginary policeman..

"I demand therefore—" Hubert Smythe was staring directly at Paul. "Dost thou, in the name of this child, renounce the devil?"

Oh, absolutely. I already renounced Sally Dingle.

The service droned on, via the Creed, to the blessing of the water.

". . . beloved Son Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of our sins, did shed out of his most precious side both water and blood—"

Did he, indeed? What kind of water was that, then? Dilute acids from the stomach? The church didn't make quite so much of the water, did they? The blood, yes. Buckets of blood spilled down the ages; and cup after cup of Communion wine. Communion water wouldn't have quite the same cachet. Couldn't baptize some-

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one in blood, though.

Paul wished that *he* could lose some water out of his side. These days the waistband of his trousers was uncomfortably tight. In fact, he felt positively obese. All those cumulative half-pints at the White Hart? Maybe too much salt in his food of late was the culprit. Convenience meals and pub snacks were making him retain water. Gas shifted in his intestines, pressed by water-laden tissues, and he squirmed so as not to vent a sulfurous stink in church.

Smythe accepted from Alicia the white package that was David Gordon; lace hung down like a dwarf's bridal train. Consecrated water spilled from the vicar's fingers upon the baby's bald head. "I baptize thee—"

Smythe received David Gordon into the flock, painting an invisible cross of water on his brow next, and handing him back to Alicia. Then he read the Thanksgiving, followed by another prayer. He instructed the godparents on their duties — fluffing his lines now, as if distracted — and finally opened his mouth to pronounce the blessing.

The baby shrieked like a cat caught in a snare.

Smythe cringed, then he, too, cried out, brandishing his right hand — the hand that had baptized.

The vicar's index finger was swelling obscenely. More a phallus than a finger.

Alicia screamed, too. The wailing baby's brows were swelling visibly, bulging. Its whole face was puffing, up, compressing its eyes tight, inflating its lips to block the mouth, closing its suddenly misshapen nostrils. The howling stopped, from lack of air. The body in the lace robe convulsed. At the same moment, Hubert Smythe's huge finger burst open at the tip, spraying blood and water at the font.

In a congregation frozen by horror, only one person moved. Matt Davis jumped up. "No!" he shouted. "That's impossible!"

At eleven that same night, Paul sat in the kitchen of Hollyhocks with the lights off and the curtains open, watching the garden by moonlight, trying to think. He felt ragged and dog-tired.

Alicia already lay upstairs, tranquilized, then put to sleep by barbiturates, dead to the world. Paul would take some sleeping pills presently, tired though he was, to give himself the alibi of chemical unconsciousness. He'd turned the lights off because village eyes would be scrutinizing Hollyhocks tonight. He sipped some whiskey. Haig. Drops of fire. They'd bought it because he didn't like it, so it would stay longer in the bottle, reserved for visitors.

His memories of the past nine or ten hours were chaos. Mrs. Badgot — formerly a nurse — trying to force

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the empty tube of a ballpoint pen down David Gordon's throat to ventilate him. Fast thinking, that. But useless. The vicar rocking from side to side like a drunk, bleeding all over his vestments. Matt insisting that the font should be covered immediately and that no one should touch the remaining water, or empty it.

Then the useless, screeching drive in Matt's BMW with a hysterical Alicia and the bloated, asphixiated baby to the hospital. Dead on arrival. Matt burbling, on the way, about allergy shock, or something. Matt phoning urgently from a pay phone in the hospital. Other arrivals by car: godparents; grandparents; Mrs. Badgot driving a bandaged Hubert Smythes, sallow with shock, and his wife. The emergency doctor's questions. Matt taking the doctor and Paul aside while a nurse was giving Alicia a sedative injection — because she was screaming at Matt, "Why was it impossible? Who were you phoning? Why were *you* so bothered about the font?"

According to Matt, a bottle of experimental synthetic hormone concentrate appeared to have vanished from the safe area at Whitney's. Or rather, the bottle in question had proved to contain tap water; *if* it was the same bottle. No, the police hadn't been told — just the security officer — because Whitney's wasn't certain that there had been a theft. There may have been a stupid error in the lab. When? Hard to say; sometime during the previous fortnight. Pointless to stir publicity. Counterproductive. *If* this was a theft, it indicated industrial espionage, and the spy was still about. Some chemist or other staff member who lived in Birdland. A magpie.

One of Whitney's analysts — whom Matt trusted — would be taking a sample from the font right now. It was quite unlikely to be the missing hormone (if any was actually missing). Why put *that* in a font before a christening? It couldn't have had such a lightning effect. The effect was wrong, anyway.

Paul said nothing. He knew. In his mind's eye he clearly saw Sally standing in the empty church, pouring clear liquid from a bottle into the font and murmuring water-words to it.

He said nothing about this even after the hospital notified police and coroner; even to the inspector and constable from Lederbury who called at Hollyhocks that evening. ("Does any one local have a grudge against you, that you know of? Mrs. Philips? Mr. Philips?" "No." "No.")

Of course he said nothing. The liquid in the font might well turn out to be the stuff stolen from Whitney's, where Sally Dingle worked; but *it couldn't have done what it did*, on its own. Unaided by enchantment. ("Enchantment, Mr. Philips? What *do* you mean?" Fall into that trap? Not likely!)

It might even prove to be harm-

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less water, after the event. ("So a chemical can be told to turn into water miraculously, like water into wine, is that it, sir?" Hmm, bring on the men in white coats with needles and straitjacket.)

And their son was dead. Not just blinded. Dead.

It was too late to tell anyone about the water-witchery. No one would manage to pin this on Sally like the tail on the donkey. She wasn't a fool. If he blurted out the truth, there'd be nothing to connect her with the theft. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Besides . . . how could she break into a safe room and know what to take? She was only canteen staff at Whitney's.

Maybe she had stolen nothing — but had hexed the holy water waiting in the font; spat into it, cursed it. The missing hormone might be a huge red herring. yes, that was it. The more Paul thought about it, the more he felt that the theft — if any — was sheer coincidence. Matt had been keyed up, nervous about the possible lab error in labeling. The horror at the church had triggered his anxieties about a missing chemical.

How could Paul accuse Sally of hexing plain water without confessing how he had . . . had it off with her? Guilt made him fantasize; that's what anyone sane would say. What a fool he would have made of himself, all to no effect — except personal disaster.

And their child was dead, vilely.

He hated Sally; and feared her. And desired her.

As he stared down the garden, the moon suddenly illuminated a misty Pook Pond and the rumply field rising beyond. The scene . . . shimmered. He saw not Charolais cows but distant cottages, hovels facing the village duck pond. An uncouth crowd clad in smocks, sleeveless surcoats, and hose was gathering. Paul started to his feet, gripping the windowsill. She was doing it again! The crowd milled, braying soundlessly. Three men dragged a silently screaming woman toward the pond, started to tie her wrists and ankles. This vision was worse — clearer — than his glimpse of Barton's half-built spa. This time it was populated, by the specters of dead peasants.

She must be nearby, as he had guessed she might be!

He opened the kitchen door, ran down the lawn in darkness — the vision had vanished — and stalked through the wild garden, circling soft-foot toward the well. A black figure loomed by it.

He hissed, "Sally Dingle!"

" 'Bout time you came. I've been missin' you. Will you fix that insurance now. An' I'll reward you, way you like it."

Painfully his foot struck a stone left lying in the grass. Immediately he knew what to do. Stooping, he hefted the stone and struck at her head. She

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sprawled against the wall of the well. He couldn't see what damage he had done, but she was certainly still alive, groaning in pained confusion. Discarding the stone, he cast about for the bucket. He freed the rope, tearing a fingernail back on the rough fiber. He trussed her ankles, trussed wrists, just as the vision had shown. Then he heaved the iron grill aside.

"No, no," she moaned. "No use. Too late. No."

"Too late, is it?"

"Yes, yes," she gasped. For a moment he thought she was encouraging him.

He upended her over the edge by the legs, let her drop headfirst. Heard, moments later, a single sludgy splash. Then he vomited on the grass.

He restored the heavy grill and walked back to the house, to take two sleeping tablets and go to bed.

It rained morosely the next day. Paul phoned his office to take several days' leave. Grandparents and Antonietta were staying at the White Hart, which had some bed-and-breakfast rooms. They soon arrived at Hollyhocks to console morosely. Matt had put up Raymond and his wife overnight; Adrian had done likewise for Maggie and her husband. They also came round to the house; then Mrs. Badgot with Ruth Smythe. The vicar was still housebound, in no fit state. The gathering resembled the aftermath of a funeral, except that the funeral hadn't yet taken place. Daniel Philips had excused himself — unforgivably, said Maggie to Paul, as though he were to blame for his brother. Maggie and Amanda Thwaite took over the kitchen, to brew cups of tea and cook a large lunch.

David Gordon should be cremated in Lederbury, Alicia decided. She couldn't bear to enter St. Mark's, Easton Hampcote again. "Not so soon, Ruth. Do you understand?"

"Hubert will . . . understand, I'm sure."

Maggie invited Alicia to come home with her for a few days after the funeral. "A change of scene? You, too, Paul," she added. Alicia shook her head, unable to decide.

After a buffet lunch, Paul carried plates to the kitchen to escape the conversations. The window was steamed up; raindrops ran down the outside. Occasional beads of condensation slid down the inside of the glass, clearing thin strips of view like those in a mirrored security window. He watched the race between blobs of moisture, betting on one, then another. Tiny pools lay on the inside paintwork.

He poked a pool with his finger. Drops of water began to run from it, up the glass. *Up.* The beads wrote raggy letters in the steam.

SAL WELL.

Trembling, he seized a tea towel and wiped the window clean. He must have written the message him-

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self with the tip of his finger. Some part of his mind had directed his hand without his knowing, without his seeing it happen.

"Sal well." What kind of "well"? She still survives? Or, she's *down* the well?

He fled from the kitchen, but found himself returning every ten minutes to check the window. A few times he wiped fresh condensation away, then quit doing this, realizing that he was creating a porthole on the rain-sodden garden and the distant well.

He ought to tip rubble down the well. Old stones and broken bricks. Buckets of rubble to cover the body! Alicia might spot him; someone might. What excuse could he have? Nobody would go near the well all winter long, and it was almost winter already. Long, wet grass; rain; chill; mud.

"Better leave well alone! Wait till spring." He shivered at the confusing ambiguity of his thoughts.

Later, the same Inspector Horrobin called with his constable driver. The postmortem on David Gordon, performed early that morning, had produced no adequate explanation other than a massive allergy reaction. Though to what? And why had Hubert Smythe also been affected so dramatically?

"I gather you're aware of the possible theft of a dangerous substance from Whitney's, sir?"

"Mr. Davies told me."

"I wanted to reassure you — not that it's any consolation, sir — that there's no conceivable connection. The liquid in that font was ordinary water. Whitney's and the police lab both tested it."

Ordinary: Paul had known it.

Not ordinary, no. Evil water, Witch water.

He nodded.

"In view of Mr. Davies's suspicions, we'd prefer to avoid ungrounded speculation."

"Softly, catchee monkey; is that it? If there *is* any monkey; or magpie." Really, Paul ought to keep his mouth buttoned.

Horrobin frowned. "Between you and me, sir, one of the village lasses who works at Whitney's has gone missing, Probably she's staying with some friend; didn't bother telling her parents. Or else she's skipped it to London with a lad. In view of Mr. Davies's, hmm, allegation, we're making some inquiries. I'm sure, after the lab analysis, you'll appreciate there's no link between that and your . . . tragedy."

Ought he to ask, "Which girl?"? Would that lead naturally on to Horrobin asking Paul's opinion of Sally Dingle? Policemen liked to accumulate information, didn't they? So Paul refrained from asking. He tried simply to look numbed by the whole business. After Horrobin and Constable

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Cresswell left, Paul hurried into the kitchen, where the window remained a blank.

The funeral took place two days later at the crematorium in Lederbury. Alicia had decided against going to stay with Maggie and Bob for a few days, though Paul urged her to; nevertheless, Maggie and her husband drove back to Hollyhocks, along with others of the family, so that the house would be comfortingly full for a while . . . before it became empty.

It was dark by four, and the curtains were closed. At six, Maggie and Bob were in the process of leaving. Light flooded from the front door over shingle and parked cars. The moon was up. Mrs. Badgot bustled in from the road.

"I don't mean to intrude! I saw you all at the door."

"Thank you for what you tried to do for David Gordon," Alicia said.

"Think nothing! I don't want to upset, but . . . have you looked at the bottom of your garden?"

Paul froze.

"I hope it's still there. I'd feel a fool." Mrs. Badgot took Alicia by the arm. Footsteps crunched the shingle as everyone walked along to a vantage point. A couple of hundred yards away, Pook Pond glowed mistily by moonlight. Somewhat closer — where the well was — a white foggy figure writhed.

"Isn't it just like a soul dancing in paradise?" whispered Mrs. Badgot. "An angel!"

To Paul's aghast eyes, the luminous shape looked more like a soul in torment.

"I think," said Mrs. Badgot, "it's a sign from your poor baby — not to grieve, because he's blessed. The wee mite did die baptized."

"That's mist," Alicia said sharply. "Mist drifting out of our well. Hubert already told me about all those oafs who saw ghosts down by Pook Pond. Mist, Mrs. Badgot, mist!"

"*I* never saw the like of that." Mrs. Badgot sounded offended. "I've looked down your garden lots of times through that gap in your hedge."

"I believe you have!"

"A well, is it?" said Bob heartily. "Why don't we take a gander? Meteorological oddity, eh? Does look a bit like a faceless apparition. Got a torch handy?"

"No," croaked Paul.

"Got one in the car."

"No! Can't you see how this is upsetting Alicia? Go away, Mrs. Badgot, please! I don't know what you were thinking of."

"But it's there," she insisted. "It's a sign."

"No, it damn well isn't. It's a trick of the moonlight."

"Fair enough," said Bob. "C'mon, Maggie, time we went."

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In any case, the wraith above the well had already started to fade.

What would Alicia see if she went down to the well the next day? If she had the wit to take the torch to shine down into the depths. A pair of heels? Legs? As soon as he could, Paul emptied the good batteries out of the torch by the back door and hid them. In their place he put used ones that he hadn't bothered to throw away. The bulb produced but a poor glow now.

It was a week later, a Saturday. Paul had witnessed the wraith once more, dancing for a while upon the well. Alicia hadn't mentioned seeing anything.

At half-one he arrived home from Lederbury to find a white police car parked outside. He ran indoors. Alicia and Constable Cresswell were talking in the sitting room. Relief welled up.

"Darling, Inspector Horrobin called—"

"Where is he? I don't see him."

"He's in the garden. Mrs. Badgot must have been gossiping about that funny mist we saw; though the inspector wouldn't say who. He asked to have a look at our well."

"In connection with that theft from Whitney's," Cresswell overrode her, "which Mr. Philips knows about. Someone may have dumped the stolen whatsit down your well — it's close to the field. A gas may be leaking."

"A gas — from a bottle of hormone? That's preposterous."

"I'm no chemist, sir. Are you?"

"You make Whitney's sound like a weapons factory!"

"You seem agitated, sir. Relax. The inspector knows what he's doing."

Very likely. Theft from Whitney's. Baby killed in church. Local girl goes missing same evening. Spook spotted in bereaved parents' garden. *Is there a link?* Ignoring Cresswell's advice, Paul hastened through to the kitchen and stared out. It had started raining. An expressionless Inspector Horrobin was treading back toward the house. His overcoat pockets could hold half a dozen torches. Paul wrenched the back door open.

"Ah, Mr. Philips. There appears to be a body down your well. Wouldn't have any idea how it got there, would you?"

Paul said nothing.

"Ankles look to be roped together. Body's upside down, you see. That should expedite recovering it, with a grapnel and winch. If the knots were properly tied. Were they, Mr. Philips?"

Rolled-up drainage piping lay on the field the police car was passing, looking like huge millipedes that would presently burrow into the soil, sucking at its black water. The segmented, flexible pipes, now slicked with rain, seemed alive, about to uncoil and squirm.

At university a friend had once

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persuaded Paul to drop half a tab of acid with him — the way they persuaded you to drink halves, and halves, in the White Hart. Paul hadn't enjoyed the experience; the LSD had invaded him, taken him over for hours like a parasite, a bright monkey sitting in his brain. Now, slumped in the backseat beside Horrobin, he felt that he was undergoing a worse drug trip.

Except that he had taken no drugs. He realized that he had become insane. Now that he was mad, the world was much sharper and clearer than ever it had been when he was sane. Before, the world had been fuzzy; he hadn't needed to pay full attention, could take reality for granted.

The sodden verge along the roadside glowed luminously. Tree skeletons etched against the sky were bodies whose flesh had rotted away, leaving branches of naked nerves. A plowed field was ten acres of chunkily knitted wool; or dog turds.

No drugs. Something had reached into him, flooding, touching every cell in his body, invading and corrupting them.

Now he understood the why and wherefore of witchcraft: it was to gain this clarity, this power of vision, this immanence. He was roused from everyday slumber, awake to existence. Other people only acted the role of being alive — of driving a car, of behaving like a proper police inspector — grotesquely and clumsily.

Horrobin leered at Paul. "Mrs. Dingle thinks her daughter ran away because she was pregnant."

"What?"

"Mrs. D. used to restock the girl's towels. Kept a count. Not enough got used last time. Sally must have missed her period and didn't flush enough clean ones away to put her mum off the scent. I'll wager the autopsy'll show she was pregnant, once she's hauled out of your well. Someone killed her because she was having their baby. She'd have made big trouble for you, Mr. Philips. That sad business with your other baby put us off the trail."

"She was what?"

"In the family way. Bun in the oven. We'll soon know. How surprised you sound. Shame you never went on the stage."

"How many months, did her mother think?"

"Consulting your mental diary? Wondering if anyone else had a poke?"

"No!"

It had been only a few weeks since they'd made love. She would hardly have known yet. Unless some Young Farmer *had* knocked her up, previous to that at a disco. . . . Unlikely; she didn't go in for boyfriends. Mrs. Dingle must have been talking rubbish. It was just the kind of thing that would appeal to a policeman. Houses of cards formed and collapsed in Paul's head.

Rain dotted the windows, running jerkily across. The wipers swished.

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The car halted at a junction to let a bus race by on the main road. Drops changed direction, downward. Beside Paul's face a single fat raindrop was climbing smoothly *up* the glass.

Sally was dead, but the water remained. Anywhere in this area! In the sky, in the fields. It cycled round and round, pervading the neighborhood over the centuries like a blot spreading outward, always refreshing itself from the source. From Pook Pond, from the well. There where the witch had been boiled alive; where Humphrey Barton had clung to a stone succubus and drowned himself; where other events must have happened, too — all of them increasing the evil power, no, the *primeval* power, that visionary power which awoke its devotees from the rubbery idiocy and banality of the everyday world.

As the car sped up in the traffic stream bound for Lederbury, that single drop continued to march defiantly up the window, which was slightly open. Paul shrank from the glass.

But of course the water had already entered him long since. It sought a human presence in the world. A viewpoint. A raindrop was quite like an eye. Perhaps it had found Sally deficient.

Insane thoughts.

Being proved insane in court was his only escape route from an ordinary, brutalizing prison where "sex offenders" weren't at all popular. So: a psychiatric lockup? Basketwork therapy, drugs, indefinite detention rather than an eight-or ten-year sentence? Even so, that might be preferable. Now was the time to choose.

Paul said to Horrobin, "Sally was a witch. I mean that literally; she was a reborn witch. A *water*-witch. I think they all were, really, in ancient times. On the Continent they burned witches to get rid of their wicked water, to convert them into dry, blazing husks. Because God created the solid earth out of liquid, and a witch sought to dissolve what was solid and ordinary and reform it magically. Make reality more fluid. So that you could master it directly. They didn't burn witches here; they hanged them with rope. Maybe afterward they burned the bodies or buried them in lime. It was a mistake to boil Sally in the caldron, when she wouldn't drown in Pook Pond. Afterward the water was poured like greasy soup onto the green, into the duck pond. The ducks laid eggs; cows drank their fill from the pond, and their udders swelled with milk. The boiled loose meat of Sally was fed to screaming hogs for their supper. Thus, in many ways she reentered the village."

"So he's a fucking fruitcake," Cresswell commented over his shoulder.

"Or else he's trying to con us that he is," replied Horrobin.

Witchcraft wasn't only the ability to *see* the world; it was also the capacity to alter the world with one's

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will, one's desires, one's imagination. Paul concentrated on the raindrop.

It changed direction, began creeping stubbornly against the wind toward the front of the car. How would it cross the gap between the doors? Paul imagined a raindrop-size bridge. The drop reappeared on the driver's window, which was also open slightly. That was the same raindrop; he knew it well. He sensed its wetness, its liquid tension, the swarm of animalcules swimming inside it, eating molecules of suspended chemicals — and eating each other. Mating, giving birth, dying. He intuited the life in the water, the spirit that was mirrored in himself. He urged that bead of water to climb the window toward the inch of ventilation.

Briefly the drop hung at the very top of the glass. It gathered, and launched itself. In slow motion he saw the drop fly at the driver's face.

Cresswell screamed deafeningly. He clapped a hand to his eye. His other hand leapt free of the wheel, clawing at that blob of boiling water that was eating its way like molten lead into his tear duct. Horrobin grabbed over the back of Cresswell's seat for the wheel, but the car was already careering, skidding, over the centerline, and a bulk flour truck — oncoming, giant-sized — was only yards away.

He was a puddle of rainwater on the verge, reflecting a small patch of blue sky. He was an eye that stared up bleakly, an eye in which reflections formed: of rain clouds, and of crows. Crows were clever scavengers of roadway carrion who never let themselves be clipped by traffic no matter how late they left the road to flap out of the way of wheels. What carrion were those black birds eyeing now? A dead driver, thrown through a splintering window? Cresswell had stopped screaming.

In fact, there was absolute silence. What sounds could a puddle hear? That's all he was: a pool of water that would presently soak into the turd-like soil.

No. *"I won't dissolve!"* He couldn't feel anything because he had broken his neck, snapped his spine, when he was thrown clear; that's why he couldn't turn his head away from the sky. His eardrums had ruptured; that was why he couldn't hear the hiss of air brakes, horns, voices, a distant ambulance siren. Ambulance men would load him carefully. He would spend the rest of his life — long or short — in a bed unable to bat an eyelid or twitch a finger, while inside his body all the waters would pulse with secret, dark activity. . . .
"But I shan't dissolve!"

Paul shook his head. The car was still driving along the road. Cresswell muttered, "Bugger it," and rubbed his eye, carrying on steering casually,

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expertly. The wipers swished.

To alter things . . . meant to see an alternative event with a vision so compelling that the event became entirely real; at least for a while. The insane dwelled in a world where alternative events continued on and on forever. Possession by evil — by primeval vision — must be very like possession by madness.

Paul stared into his lap at the twin bracelets he wore. One was surely a stainless-steel watch strap. The other, a chain and shield inscribed with his allergy to penicillin. For some reason, chain and strap had fused together, bonded by powerful magnetism. He couldn't move his wrists apart.

Now he knew why those ignorant medieval powers that be had been able to torture and execute witches; why a demon never came to the witch's rescue. That was because a witch saw the demon coming to her aid so vividly it was as if this had already occurred — until the hot iron tore her flesh, or the faggots blazed, or the water began to bubble. Until she suddenly lost faith and screamed. It was that loss of faith in her vision that was fatal.

Sally's vision sustained her while she floated on Pook Pond. It failed when the peasants boiled her. Had it failed her again when he hit her and drowned her? Perhaps. But perhaps the vision had passed from her to Paul, given away gladly. Why, she hardly had struggled. Had grinned up at him from underwater. Or was that an alternative event?

People were made of water. In their organs, glands, and limbs. In the brain. Because of all the vulnerable water in them, people could be controlled by a master or mistress of magic. Could be made to dance to the song of water — as he had danced to Sally's tune. Now she was free of the fierce, luminous vision, in which you must either believe totally or be destroyed.

Since she had come back from the dead, why, so would he. He had drunk the water of immortality.

The car sped into the outskirts of Lederbury.

The cell, with its single light bulb protected by a grill, was bare apart from a bolted-down bed and the toilet bowl that lacked a seat: a china caldron.

As Paul sat on the cold ceramic rim, he stared between his parted legs into the water.

Sally had immersed herself in Pook Pond, baptized herself, drowned herself. Her flesh had dissolved in the water of the caldron. She had drunk the well into the lungs. Dying was dissolving, was it not? He had fought against dissolving. That had been his mistake, when he sat handcuffed in the police car. His failure of faith.

Paul reached a hand down into the bowl where his diluted urine swam. He reestablished contact with

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his water. He imagined himself dissolving: his body fluids, the overwhelming percentage of his person, flooding into the china toilet bowl, by way of sewage pipes out of the police station, via a treatment plant to discharge in a river not too far away.

He imagined furiously — *"I believe!"* — and began to melt away from his surface down to deep inside himself; and the bright light in the cell started to fade.

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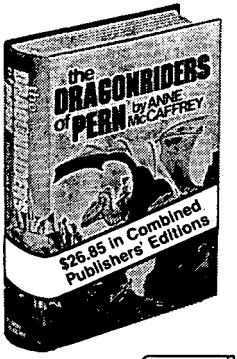

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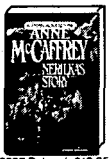

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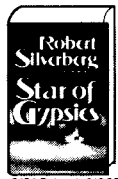

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